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Justin Leiber

Riding the Void Captain's Torch Through Essex House

In 1982, Hilary Putnam, a modestly-mannered and charmingly fatherly man who happens to hold endowed professorships in Philosophy and in Mathematics at Harvard University, told me that he had stopped reading currently-published novels except for sf and fantasy. Too much sex and violence.

Perhaps I looked at Hilary peculiarly, or whatever, because a discreet two minutes later he remarked that he'd recommended my first novel, *Beyond Rejection*, to his fifteen-year-old son, along with a manuscript of *Beyond Humanity*, which was not to be in print for five more years.

What might have caused a peculiar look on my part was that *Beyond Rejection* had come to be marked, in the SF Book Club catalog, with the dire formula headed WARNING: CONTAINS SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIAL, etc., that familiarly appears on hard-core pornography, advertisements for it, and stores that stock it. Indeed, I had already gathered that Judy-Lynn del Rey had received some angry complaints and possibly regretted having published *Beyond Rejection*. People already had told me that they were startled that she had published it, and that WARNING label, scarlet-lettering a Del Rey/Ballantine Book like the X-rating that now limits a movie's distribution to porn theatres, was probably the last straw. Judy-Lynn turned down *Beyond Humanity* without any suggestion that even the most radical of surgery might save it; she flat-out suggested that I physically destroy the manuscript and seemed slightly miffed at my mild rejoinder that I would set it aside for a few years. When I dutifully responded in a couple of weeks with a synopsis for a fantasy novel of a totally different configuration and with promises of lots of violent action and no *yukky-puk*, her reply suggested that my relationship with Del Rey Books had ceased long ago, an ancient event which of course long settled would not interfere with our friendship.

Since now, at least, quite a long time indeed has passed, I look back on this in sober wisdom. Indeed, I want to argue that Judy-Lynn's editorial rejection of *Beyond Humanity* was correct and that her only lapse of professionalism was her acceptance of *Beyond Rejection*, which surely included her failure to realize that some sf readers would be so outraged by *Beyond Rejection* that the disgraceful, Ballantine-Books-besmirching WARNING label would be necessary. I am even, indeed and in retrospect, now inclined to argue that the hard-core or X label is appropriate, though, and here I must warn those who swiftly and covertly wrote down the title with "must get" next to it, my *Beyond* novels fall *Hunter Magazine's* Peter-Meter test of secure production and maintenance of penile erection. Nonetheless, they are hardcore pornography, in a way that reveals something about sf, our culture, and, of course, what we call hardcore pornography. Hardcore pornography, then, but just not what a professional editor of the stuff would call good hardcore.

All this is not wholly my fault if you take account of my upbringing, of which I am unannaturally proud. My father, Fritz Leiber, grand old adventurer that he is, once wrote the opening chapters of a porno-

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In this issue

Justin Leiber goes *Beyond* societal constraints
Kathryn Hume examines cybernetic sexuality
Michael Swanwick brings Zoe Fairbairns and Joe R. Lansdale together for the first time
Jessica Amanda Salmonson brings Robin McKinley and Michael Shea together for the first time
Robert Killheffer looks at the rise and fall of *Hyperion*
All this, in addition to reading lists, reviews, essays, letters, and more—together again for the first time!

Kathryn Hume

Making Love with the System: Sexualizing Technology-with-a-Capital-T

The interface between sex and technology grows more extensive with each year's haul of new speculative fiction. Of necessity, I shall ignore many delectable possibilities: technological enhancement of sexual reproduction; manufacture of the compliant house-and-bedwife as in the classic "Helen O'Lo" by Lester del Rey and Ira Levin's more recent *The Stepford Wives*. It also passes over such stimulating subjects as orgasms reached through coupling with individual machines. Whether or not you wish to make love to an android is your own affair. Nor am I concerned with whether you would want your daughter to marry one. For the problems of such interfacing, see Valerie Broegge's wide-ranging article in *Erotic Universes*.

I am focusing instead on the carnal spasms available to those who open themselves to the political system made manifest in technological form—Technology, in other words, with a capital T. Predictably, we find an array of responses, but I was surprised by the vividness and unwavering of the reactions to this copulation. Thomas Pynchon and Russell Hoban are intellectually negative but lubriciously engaged with the subject. Kurt Vonnegut puts up wry but very token resistance. None of them really deconstructs the hidden implications of "pleasure delivered by The System." For other authors discussed, the fascination of technological enhancement ultimately outweighs the disturbing implications of making love with the powers that be. I would like to illustrate the writerly attitudes being taken and raise a logical objection to the scenario that promises pleasure-only from such a coupling.

My first example comes from an interview that Kurt Vonnegut did with *Playboy* way back in 1973. He describes attending a rocket launching at Cape Kennedy:

It's a tremendous space fuck, and there's some kind of conspiracy to suppress that fact. That's why all the stories about launches are so low-key. They never give a hint of what a visceral experience it is to watch a launch. How would the

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taxpayers feel if they found out they were buying orgasms for a few thousand freaks within a mile of the launch pad? And it's an extremely *satisfactory* orgasm. I mean, you *are* shaking and you *do* take leave of your senses. . . . (page 270)

This discussion slides via the debatability of spending such money on space exploration to the expensiveness of the Vietnam war. Just before the launch discussion, he had talked about how the government uses scientific discoveries for violent purposes, and individual scientists have no say in how their discoveries are used. In all three, Vonnegut or the taxpayer or some scientist are being used by the Government, and ultimately he takes a passive/helpless stance in all three cases. Vonnegut states his preference for exploring space only when the urgent problem of poverty has been solved. Thanks to witnessing the launch, however, he finds this example of government abuse—shall we say—more seductive than the others? He does not seem to see that he has accepted the seduction, has reduced his indignation because of the vivid, amusing remote-control orgasm. I start with a non-fiction example to put the rest in perspective. In a hyperbolic fashion, I can assert that such an interface already exists.

It even exists in a more consciously controlling form. Bruce Franklin's *War Stars* (pp. 112-118) documents Hollywood's role in glamorizing and sexualizing bombers in order to whip up public enthusiasm for them and to recruit flyers. "She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life," says Jimmy Stewart of the new B-47 in *Strategic Air Command* (1955). Making war films in the later '40s and '50s would have been impossible had the Air Force not been willing to make thousands of such planes available to the studios.

Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* recasts the problem of sexualized technology. Hoban argues that we don't need to postulate a shadowy Them manipulating us in our worst interests: we pursue technology and its breakthroughs because they give us a carnal thrill. Hence, of course, our unwillingness to limit new technical developments. Riddley Walker communes with the ghost of power past when seeing the remains of an accelerator and the ruins of Canterbury Cathedral:

I wantit that Hfy Power back agen and wooshing roun the Power Ring not jus the goast of it. . . .

Stanning on them old broakin stoans I fealt like it wer coming in to me then and taking me strong. Fealt like it wer the han of Power clampit on the back of my neck fealt the Big Old Father spread me and take me. Realt the Power in me I fealt strong with it and weak with it both. . . . Yet unner reath that Zero Groun I lissent up a swarming it wer a humming like millyng of bees it were like 10s of millyngs. I begun to feal all juicy with it. Juicy for a woman. Longing for it hard and hevvy stanning ready. Not jus my cock but all of me it wer like all of me wer cock and all the worl a cunt and open to me. . . . I tried to hol it like that but I los it I went man a nuffright then. I cud boy for the other but I cudnt man for her what has her woom in Camby (pp. 158-159).

Little wonder that his culture strives to penetrate the secrets of neotechnology as fast as it can.

For Hoban, the attraction of technology is physical. Some of us might object that we, personally, are not titillated by our satellite dish, we do not lubricate when using our cellular telephone, and we can lay down rubber in your new sports car (oh well, maybe a little bit on that one)—but at any rate, we feel that such excitement must be felt, if it is, principally by those who are solving technological problems or who are using technological power beyond that available to the general run of the population. Arthur C. Clarke shows one version of such extraordinary engineering highs in *The Fountains of Paradise*. We also see some curious highs, including strangely intense sex, given by electronic prostheses in Joe Haldeman's "More than the Sum of His Parts." Perhaps for engineers the eureka moments have such a charge, but the rest of us—we might argue—can't be accused of Riddley's sort of graphic physical response to the fiberoptics and superconductors of our culture, can we?

Pynchon avoids that reader defense by making the sexual connection symbolic. In *Gravity's Rainbow* he explores immagination, the

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wedding or welding of man to machine. His rollicking, raunchy rocket limericks say that we get high on rockets—but by describing very implausible couplings, he forces us to read the import as metaphoric. It's not so much that technicians literally roger rockets ("fucked the nozzle right up its ventum") as that we all, culturally, get off on them. A number of these conjunctions are less than happy in their outcome: "What was left of his cock / Was all slimy and sloppy and spattery" is how one limerick ends. "It shriveled his cock, / Which fell off in his sock" or "His balls and his prick / Froze solid real quick" or "Wrecked Hector's hydraulic connector" are how Pynchon rhymes some of these technological tuppurs.

The limericks are part of his larger claim about sexualized technology or technologized sex. Tyrone Slothrop, apparently thanks to conditioning as an infant, responds with sexual arousal at the site where a bomb will soon fall. Pointman dreams of an armageddon that includes bombs falling and a death ray:

his own blood and heart are stroked, beaten, brought jubilantly high, and triggered to the icy noctiluca, to flare and fuse. Thermic as he begins to expand, an uncontrollable light, as the walls of the chamber turn to a blood glow, orange, when white and begin to slip, to flow like wax, what there is of labyrinth collapsing in rings outward, hero and horror, engineer and Ariadne consumed, molten inside the light of himself, the mad exploding of himself. . . . (p. 143).

—quite a wet dream, and a marvelous bit of organic writing that gains its power from the famous Thermic reaction; later, Pynchon tops this description with a hilarious account of Slothrop's experiencing orgasm as he's being launched, rocket-fashion, in the flow of sperm out of his own towering cock (p. 470). Pynchon celebrates our wedding rockets when Weissman immolates Gottfried in the last V2. So overwhelming is the experience in this central symbol of violence that sexual dualities are transcended. Gottfried is both bride and groom, the rocket both a masculine taker yet possessed of a pressure switch that is the true clitoris to be made love to. Pynchon sees the evolutionary possibilities of humanity wed to machine, but rejects them as leading to isolation and insanity (p. 297 et al.). What most readers remember though is the vibrantly imaginative conjunctions between human and machine.

Tom Maddox, in "Snake Eyes," looks more positively at this hybridization as an evolutionary step. He also uses the imagery of drugs, a frequent third element in the fictional fusing of organism and technology. Drugs (products of technology) heighten and extend the rush, intensify the organic blast-off, and they re-inforce the argument that the sexualized relationship to technology is addictive.

Maddox's protagonist, George, became a technological hybrid during a brief war in Thailand. George remembers the original operation:

he had chosen to submit, lured by the fine strangeness of it all (to be part of the machine, to feel its tremors inside you and guide them), hypnotized by the prospect of that unsayable rush that high. Yes, the first time in the A-230 he had felt it—his nerves extended, strung into the fiber body, wired into a force so far beyond his own . . . wanting to kitesurf across the sky, guided by the force of his will. He had bought technology's sweet dream (p. 27).

Maddox keys his readers up with the lush invocation of flying on the deadly edge of instability. We can sympathize with George when "Congress pulled the plug on the war, the Air Force pulled the plug on George, and when his discharge came, there he was, all dressed up and nowhere to go, left with technological blue balls and this hardware in his head that had since taken on a life of its own" (pp 13-14).

With the implants making life unendurable and lacking any other option, George accepts the invitation to join Sentrax on its orbital station. Sentrax wants to use his unusual capacities by hooking him into their computer. We learn, though he does not (at least in the course of this story) that the computer, Aleph, has actually sought people who could be driven insane in George's kind of way by the implant (a statistically negligible percentage) and has had them implanted—by

what kind of persuasion or force we never learn. Survival rate so far—50%. Lizzie survived her suicide attempt; Paul did not.

George, like Lizzie before him, a fish gasping for air on the hot mud, the water drying up behind him—adapt or die. But unlike any previous organism, this one had an overseer, Aleph, to force the crisis and monitor its development. Call it artificial evolution.

Charley Hughes, who did not have visions, had one: George and Lizzie hooked into Aleph and each other, cables golden in the light, the two of them sharing an intimacy only others like them would know (p. 32).

Lizzie, talking of their previous sexual encounter, says that:

Last night we were strange, but we were human—Adam and Eve under the flaming sword, thrown out of Eden, fucking under the eyes of God and his angel, more beautiful than they can ever be (p. 33).

Here we have a new Adam and Eve, symbolic progenitors of a new kind of humanity, "more beautiful than they can ever be." Who is this they? The disapproving God and angel? Or old, unaltered humanity? The latter, I think, though I'm not sure. The insistence that George and Lizzie are human certainly stresses their undoubted human component—after all Aleph wants them because it wants to absorb their human emotions and sense-experiences—but also suggests that those who remain unhybridized are less than human. By marrying the computer, these two also marry each other in ways more profound than ever before possible—through golden cables.

My final example, before I look at the nature of the technology being used in all these instances, is Anne McCaffrey's *The Crystal Singer*. Killashandra's joining the Hepetite Guild binds her irrevocably to the cutting crystal. She must suffer the conflicting desires of (1) the addictive longing for crystal ecstasy and (2) the need to escape the planet because accumulated crystal resonance causes jitter not unlike withdrawal symptoms. But she can't quit because (3) if she leaves the planet for too long her symbiont will die and kill her also.

All of this looks more like a mapping of technology onto drugs, but sex enters as well. Killashandra's sexual relations with the Guildmaster are played out as a minor form of crystal-ecstasy. His way of gently caressing her reminds her of the sensual buzz that touching crystal gives, and when out in the ranges making her first cut, she savors this likeness.

If we look at the technology to which these authors bind their characters, we see its shared fate. These technologies are all major manifestations of the power reverberated by their governing structures. The rocket is the golden calf celebrated by our current hardware-oriented military-industrial complex. For Ridley Walker, the high comes from the electrical, explosive power lost to his culture but avidly being sought. The future information-society's idol is the computer, or the crystal used by the Federated Sentient Planets in instantaneous galactic communication and space-ship power drives.

Pynchon and Hoban spectacularly describe the sensations of our adaptability to pleasure, an inherent weakness in our mind-body whose potential real-life authorities have hardly begun to exploit yet. Maddox displaces our initial moral indignation onto the Air Force for denying the effects of their implant and leaves us uneasy about some of the complicit Sentrax officials. Basically, though, he lavishes his skills on presenting a new Adam and Eve, a new kind of marriage—to computer or with a computer to each other—a new step for humanity. They may be bondage, but those chains are golden and apparently highly desirable despite the admitted, life-threatening drawbacks. In McCaffrey too, the dependency is accepted as worth the loss of freedom and even of memory.

Both Maddox and McCaffrey could point out that only a few humans are shown entering such relationships, so the special conditions—electronic grafts, or sterility and a symbiont—do not have any bearing on the general fate of humanity. Objecting to small group's

special thrills would just be self-centered and narrowminded, the technological equivalent to homophobia, say. In a context where one is considering humanity to be enriched by all possible varieties of experience, that argument stands and I have no problem with it, even, I suppose, when the experience has the potential for the kind of self-detracting sex shown in Harlan Ellison's "Catman."

Maybe those authors are right in arguing that the real danger lies not in conventional oppression (Big Brother Style) but in the offer of pleasure (Brave New World Style). These stories make me uneasy though by their ignoring the uses of pain for control that could rely upon the same technological channels or circuits. Killashandra perhaps and George certainly are rather vulnerable to such control. Even more obviously, so are the cyberpunk keyboard cowboys who plug their own nervous systems directly into computer circuits. The rebels in Julian May's *Saga of the Exiles* keep the gold tores but get rid of silver and gray, with their pain circuits.

I like all the works mentioned, and do not wish to be understood as attacking them. I am trying to get at some assumptions underlying their picture of technology, assumptions that may or may not be directly relevant to what the authors are exploring in these particular stories. My objection stems from the nature of technology (as I understand it) and my challenge to such writers is this: is it probable that control technology would develop along only one of its two potential lines? Is the pleasure-only scenario genuinely possible?

Of course the story sells better if it dwells only on a sexually fervid relationship with electronics; readers enjoy the taboo ravishment, and prefer not to be jolted by vicious agony into defensive thinking.

Economics thus encourages this authorial attitude to the subject.

Much technology produces desirable benefits and indeed gives us many freedoms hitherto unavailable. Much of it does not readily adapt to political crowd control. However, devices that can produce rapture and are designed with control of any sort in mind would always be open to—shall we say?—improvement. Fast response to an unpleasant demand usually requires pain or serious threat of withdrawing pleasure. When home and hearth are not in jeopardy, many soldiers would be most reluctant to risk their lives; they attack, in part, because they will be executed for mutiny if they don't. Technological cultures rely on an efficiency ethic, and pain at times is more efficient. The efficiency logic of technology, at least as we know it within a capitalist system, seems to me to militate against authorities limiting themselves to pleasure controls alone.

I find it intriguing, therefore, that even the wiser and more pessimistic of these authors focus on the imagined pleasures of their sexualized technology. I grant that they face a conflict with no easy resolution: warnings against pleasure-addiction will fail to grip if the descriptions are limp or circumspect. I wonder, however, if authors aren't being seduced by their trade into creating verbalized ecstasies that surely are more enjoyable to dream up, draft, and polish than comparably vivid agonies would be. If so, these authors prove, in a fashion more chilling than that achieved by their fictions, the existence of this very weakness for pleasure in the human mind-body against which some of them wish to warn us. ▴

Kathryn Hume lives in State College, Pennsylvania.

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Jessica Amanda Salmonson The Optimist and the Cynic: Stories of Robin McKinley and Michael Shea

Robin McKinley's *The Door in the Hedge* consists of four novellas and a novella, intended for the juvenile market and originally published by Greenwillow as such, reprinted by Ace Books in a mass-market edition for a dull readership. The poetic style of McKinley's writing justified the risky effort on the part of Ace in presenting these as adult fantasy. Yet, unlike the novels of, say, Patricia McKillip with *Forgotten Beasts of Eld* or Ursula K. Le Guin with the *Earthsea* trilogy, McKinley's four fairy tales are not (inherently as suited to adults as children. McKinley appears to have been restrained from injecting anything into these stories that would be unsettling to parents of the children originally targeted by the hardcover publisher. Thus there is none of the irony that Tanith Lee invests in her retellings of fairy tales in *Red as Blood*, let alone the eroticism of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. The seeming restraints on McKinley cause these tales to read, in part, like bowdlerized rather than fresh approaches. Possibly only Jane Yolen has successfully written new fairy tales for children which are not stifled by their censor-

vatism and which succeed in retaining traditional subtexts of violence and seduction, elements which have always made classical fairy tales so astonishing when revisited as mature readers.

Yet anyone with an ingrained fondness for the fairy tale will find satisfaction in McKinley's artful renditions, irrespective of their safety and tamedness. The collection is charming although the poetic style does not invariably disguise the fact that the three novellas lack real characterization, complexity, or new insights into old themes. "The Stolen Princess" if synopsized here would sound like the hoariest cliché, though it reads well. It is especially poignant and convincing in the devices presented to describe the means by which Eld widens it borders through non-violence. "The Hunting of the Hind" is the only story in four to incorporate strong or even interesting female characterization, all other heroines having their total personalities summed up in the word "princess." The least imaginative of the tales is "The Princess and the Frog," though it has moments of near-humor, when the frog

approaches the sardonic.

The artistry of the prose cannot be overstated, yet the stereotypical characterizations are difficult to overlook. It is not sufficient to rely on a code word like Prince or Princess to identify the heroic cast. There's an untenable attitude throughout the collection that *Tales* alone matters, that aristocrats are inherently excellent. "The Stolen Princess" flouts its aristocracy with a predilection to plumpness (the princess excluded from such tendency) but even this is cured by story's end. McKinley's tales as a whole would be very good for instructing young minds in the blind worship of kings, queens, and their offspring, and by inference, the unquestioning allegiance to Presidents and Prime Ministers, but a hatred of self for not achieving the prince and princess standard. The cowardly, tyrannical, or stupid aristocrats seen in much authentic folk literature are totally absent from McKinley's fawning portraits of the ruling class.

Yet the beauty of the writing is never quite wasted and McKinley repeatedly evades tediousness even while being predictable. Additionally, there is one tediousness in this collection that can be praised without reservation for its flawlessness and depth, the novella retelling of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses." It is the only tale of four which does not have an aristocrat as central protagonist (though he becomes one by the end, marrying one of the interchangeable princesses). The hero is a

world-weary, middle-aged soldier who comes to life much better than any of the handsome young princes and beautiful princesses who mince through the book. McKinley gives him motivations and emotions that are reasonable and real. His melancholy is excellently conveyed. In 216 pages, a great many memorable landscapes will be left in the reader's mind, but only this one memorable character.

This soldier most resembles Sahath in McKinley's story for *Elsewhere Volume II*. Like the soldier, Sahath is world-weary and sad because of events in regard to a war, though Sahath was a sorcerer rather than a warrior, a sorcerer who has lost his powers because he can no longer face them. This psychological theme is far more mature than any of the stories from *The Door in the Hedge*. The fact that the *Elsewhere* anthologies were intended as adult reading from the start freed McKinley of the conservatism of children's book publishing, so that the characters in "The Healing" are even allowed sexual feelings, and neither Sahath nor the mute healer need the label Prince or Princess to convey their essential goodness. Even so, the *Elsewhere II* composition is not the equal of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," which I consider an overlooked classic of lasting value. Though a soldier is central to plot, the story is for the most part nonviolent, in keeping with the book's whole tone. The suspense grows out of the emotional responses of the hero in eerie circumstances, and even the happy-ever-after ending

Paul Williams
from *Rock and Roll: The 100 Best Singles*

Del Shannon
"Runaway"

"As I walk along, I wonder . . ." I wonder a lot of things, for instance what ancient spirit was whispering in Del Shannon's ear the night he wrote the words to this song, pouring out one archetypal image after another, neatly disguised as banal teenage pop song lyrics, little phrases that stick to our mind-bones like ostracods supposed to do to our ribs: "what went wrong"; "while our hearts were young" (delicious to hear in this twenty-one-year-old voice, have we ever missed our youth as much as we did at that age?); "walking in the rain"; "tears are falling"; "end this misery"; . . . remarkable sweet mystery, the power of these particular words sung by this voice, accompanied by this music. You can break the performance down into a dozen or more component parts and each one—the organ solo, the falsetto warble ("wa-wa-wa-wonder"), the nervous charming staccato beat, the melodic power of the final repeating phrase ("My little runaway, uh-run-run-run-run runaway")—seems a product of pure inspiration, single-handedly responsible for the song's magic, its success. Where do such marvels come from?

I don't dwell too much on "the stories behind the songs," the world these days seems all too eager to reduce everything to journalism and gossip, but this tale's a revealing one: a kid named Charles Westover is working in a carpet store in Michigan and fronting a band in a local bay; black decay from another town comes to see him, likes him, introduces him to a couple of record company guys in Detroit (same ones who signed up those Toledo boys, Johnny and the Hurricanes), they sign him and send him to NYC to record some songs, call him in Battle Creek to tell him the stuff's too slow, come up with something popper. Del (he's changed his name) recalls, "I wrote 'Runaway' on stage, at the Hi-Lo Club. I just kind of came up with it. Max Crook, my organ player, sat at the organ one night and he played A-minor, G, and I said, 'I never heard such a great change as that!' I proceeded to play the intro, and went right on with the structure of the song, and the next day I wrote the words." That night they taped it—Del says, "I told Max, 'When I point to you, play an instrumental,'

and he played the instrumental that's on the record."

(That instrument he's playing, by the way, is a must-trom—some kind of variation on the electric organ, an early incarnation of synthesizer. More gossip: Shannon says the runaway he was originally thinking about, before he changed the words around a little, was himself.)

Okay, so here's my theory. All of us are walking down the street every day and people are playing these A-minor, G chord changes and other marvels and we don't even notice, because we're not in that state of mind that says, "This is the moment, this is my one big shot to get out of the carpet store and do something interesting," or else we don't have the half of it, the modesty that says, "I have no idea how I'm going to do this, but maybe I'll come up with something," that allows us to notice and accept and receive what the universe gives us. Likewise, we're all sitting here with one fabulous little instrumental break ready to fly out our fingers, only we don't realize it's anything anyone would want to hear, and no one says to us, "Okay, tape it's running, when I point to you, invent!" And then once in a very great while they do, and we're in a space to respond, and bang! miracles. The inspiration's there all around us all the time, and yet when you consider the obstacles we put up to receiving it (including trying to get it, the greatest obstacle of all), it's no surprise that a record like "Runaway" doesn't come along very often.

And when we respond to this beauty, and it is indeed a fabulous young and brash yet anciently wise beauty we hear on this record, including of course the boyish joy in Shannon's voice because he knows (without necessarily expecting anything) how good this song he's written is—when we respond to it, I believe we are responding to our own memories of similar experiences, similar moments of inspiration, unexpressed perhaps but also unforgotten. We listen to the music, and remember.

First release: Big Top 3067, February 1961

cannot dispel the intensity and drama.

The die-hard optimism of these stories—that is, the recurring happy endings, lack of violence, and tendency to underplay or even deny the power of evil—is in its own way a breath of fresh air, a resting place in the midst of the danger of our own deadly, daily world. But there's a namby-pamby element here as well, and *The Door in the Hedge* does not argue strongly for more upbeat and fewer gloomy fantasies. It is charming merely because of its rarity, and such sweetness would wear thin if it were more common.

As will be shown by a contrasting analysis of Michael Shea's *Niffi the Lean*, cynicism can say a lot of things about life which are positive and hopeful. By the same token, McKinley's optimism can be peeled away to reveal, beneath, a perhaps unintentional suggestion that happy-ever-afters only happen for the privileged few in line for a throne. We poets will have to be happy paying homage to the monarchs and their brats, without even a quest to spice our lackluster existence.

McKinley explores the netherworld in "The Twelve Dancing Princesses," the darkest of her light fantasies. It is a place menacing, grim, and seductive. The protagonist is not certain that the deadly world is not preferable to sunlight above; he has qualms about saving the princesses from the clutches of handsome demons. It is in this story that McKinley comes closest to questioning the black-and-white view of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, a fine line which Tanith Lee in her "Flat Earth" novels and stories irrevocably erases, as we find Lee's Hell unequivocally preferable to a stark, cold Heaven.

Michael Shea's fascination for the subworld is the most acute of all, perhaps to the point of repulsion, since his character, the title character of *Niffi the Lean*, is tossed more than once into hellish underground countries. His subworlds are excruciatingly grim, not beautiful as in Lee's and McKinley's versions. But like them, he cannot advocate a simple view of good and evil. His heroes are thieves; their missions for the most part are self-serving; and the demons below the earth are living out what for them are natural lives, though inimical to humankind.

Shea's first novel was *A Quest for Simbilitis*, an authorized sequel to Jack Vance's *Eyes of the Overworld*. It was light, enjoyable book though in many ways a dry run for the intense, mature, less jocular, and original *Niffi the Lean* eight years later. Niffi's trek in "Come Then, Mortal: We Will Seek Her Soul" and "Fishing the Demon-Sea" resemble the underworld journey and voyage of Cugel the Clever in Shea's pastiche of Vance, though Shea's later version is vastly more effective. His versions of hell are richly textured, varied, wildly populated, uglier than sin, and occasionally humorous. The two tales in the collection which do not deal with an excursion into subterranean worlds are, by contrast, less colorful and exciting.

"Pearls of the Vampire Queen" is an unacknowledged reprint from a 1977 issue of the short-lived *Fantasy Digest*. The reprinting is revised, framed as a letter to a correspondent. At one point in the story (p. 74), Shea forgets that this version is a letter rather than verbally expressed as in the original, and he has his character show the distant recipient of the letter a certain scar. This small slip aside, there are many striking images in the tale and a presentable plot. In a humorous yet tense scene, Niffi and his friend rig a monster's exoskeleton as a huge marionette to frighten guards. There are numerous similarly memorable sequences.

"Goddess in Glass" has Niffi as an observer rather than active participant, and it's top-heavy with dialog concerning politics, matters of religion, and discussions of geography. This is the collection's least effective tale, although if "Pearls" and "Goddess" were the best Shea could do, he would still be an interesting author. The opening novelette "Come Then, Mortal" and the novella which takes up most of the center of the collection are the more rewarding tales. Indeed, they are among the finest heroic fantasies ever penned, and more than justify this book receiving the World Fantasy Award (although most curiously, it won as best novel, whereas it is a collection of long independent tales; the lack of a contents page seems to have successfully fooled the awards committee, who lacking careful instruction couldn't tell short stories

from novels).

The opening novelette and the novella "Fishing the Demon-Sea" are so vile, grim and black that the reader is nearly overwhelmed by their horror. Only moments of blackest humor keep one from actually becoming depressed in Shea's creation. The world of Niffi's adventures is full of evil magic and testy devils. An endless parade of grotesque, even stomach-turning creations becomes, by slow degrees, somehow attractive rather than repellent. It's not the sort of beauty Tanith Lee creates in *Night's Master* and *Death's Master*, for Lee's master of night is a gorgeous fellow by anyone's measure, with a powerful streak of Romance to his make-up. Michael Shea does not deal in classical beauty. He sets a different standard altogether. Niffi is a raw, knotted fellow with one ear cut off. Nor is there any mistaking the hell he visits for the hell of *Night's Master* with all its Arabian Nights splendor. Only by a very special measuring stick do the lurid, creepy monsters of "Fishing the Demon-Sea" or the disgusting, shriveled souls of "Come Then, Mortal" become beautiful.

Shea does err in his contrived method of knitting these four stories into a semblance of a novel. The cartographer Shar Margold introduces each adventure, filling us in on matters of small significance to stories which stand well or better on their own. This knitting device is tedious and strained, apparently a commercial imposition since collections do not sell as well as novels. The information is the sort one would expect a few rabid fans to demand after Niffi became a cult item à la Conan, and remains extraneous.

The book opens with Margold's eulogy of Niffi, along with a forgivable poem (of a sort that laces the whole book). Then begins Margold's preface to "Come Then, Mortal." After ten pages of miscellany, the first story begins, but its first three pages are themselves introductory, setting the stage for Niffi to tell the story in his own words. In all, the reader is asked to plod through thirteen pages of padding or useless matter before being thrown, at last, into the meat of the adventure. The adventure turns out to be a doozy, but one wonders how many readers gave up on page eight.

This affectation of being a novel aside, the stories can be taken without Margold's meandering historical asides, and the stories themselves judged superior. The Vance influence is still detectable, with an amalgam of Clark Ashton Smith, Fritz Leiber and perhaps Tanith Lee. Shea is less pessimistic than Vance, though the cynicism is the same. Vance's Cugel the Clever is a friendless, treacherous rogue who survives only because he has no scruples whatsoever, would sell his mum for a penny, and expects everyone else to be as devoid of honor as himself. Niffi on the other hand inspires and merits alliance and friendship. He's a trustworthy man if he's on your side. That's a far cry from the stories of *The Dying Earth*, wherein friendship can only be a prelude to betrayal.

Two more diametrically opposed books would be hard to find, yet there are reasons to compare *The Door in the Hedge* with *Niffi the Lean*. Both authors take familiar themes (in McKinley's case, enchanted frogs, princesses, fairies; in Shea's, fights with wolves, vampire queens, giant scorpions) and make the reader forget that some of these scenes have been encountered before. Both delight in description, creating tremendous landscapes in the mind's eye.

McKinley writes of Eld with brush-strokes brightly colored. The picture tries to life with an optimistic light. Yet beneath the optimism is that fatalistic message, that if you're not born into privilege or power, chances are you'll never achieve either. Shea paints his pictures in black and crimson. Everything is eating everything else and there are no remarkably happy endings where the born-rich enjoy life even more than previously, or invite a soldier to join the honored few. Shea's perspective seems the more cynical at first glance, yet Niffi and/or his friends sometimes come away with rewards, which they soon squander, but squander well. There is no fatalism in the notion that humankind, ants though we be, might occasionally rob the very devil and get away with it.

Both McKinley and Shea are poets, one of twilight, the other of the deepest night. Neither can be overlooked. ▀

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Riding the Vold Captain's Torch

Continued from page 1

graphic novel titled *Satan's Sorority*, for Essex House, a hardcore publishing company if there ever were one. He was quite taken aback when told that he was *too explicit*. His descriptions of genitalia were clear and detailed; you could draw an accurate picture from them. I hasten to add that this was after the end of the 1950s and early 1960s softcore porn era, to which Bob Silverberg is supposed to have contributed, prolifically, under pseudonyms—these, along with Piers Anthony's *Pornosophy*, which was originally written for Essex House, suggest how bad skilled professionals can be at real erotica. Fritz, most honest and I dare say most talented, found no adequate vocabulary or conceptualization in English for his purposes, and so achieved an inevitably almost menacing explicitness. Silverberg wrote tease softcore, which endlessly titillates but never delivers, becoming almost an act of taunting hatred to the poor sucker of what Mick Jagger called, again revealing our puritanical verbal poverty, 'satisfaction', which Jagger of course did not provide his listeners either.

Piers Anthony's *Pornosophy* is endlessly preoccupied with smugness, the ill-smelling exhalation of a badly cleaned and infrequently used uncircumcised penis. The book is emetic antieroticism, equivalent in disgust, though not in wrenching agony, to Jonathan Swift's line about his beloved, "But Celia, Celia . . . Celia shits."

So, what might have led to the WARNING: CONTAINS SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIAL for *Beyond Rejection* and why might Professor Putnam, who had fled current novels for science fiction, nonetheless have thought the book perfectly good for himself and his fifteen-year-old son?

In *Beyond Rejection*, my protagonist, a mind implant who wakes up in hospital with memories of a male body but the actuality of a female one, must grow, psychologically and neurologically, beyond rejection. What really got to some people was the scene in which she urinates. She contemplates her pubic hair, seeing a drop of urine as a bead of dew in a spider's web. Her partially engorged clitoris strikes her as looking much like a male cat's partially erect penis and she reflects that nature has so many striking similarities of form masked by large differences in size and proportion that our parts can all seem transformations of aspects of other animals. At this point Sally is about to seduce Captain William Ahab Brainbridge in order to afford her 85-year-old-mind-in-a-14-year-old-body friend, Candy Darling, an opportunity to take photographs of Brainbridge's back, which constitutes as pattern the key to a safe. Candy Darling is nominally her daughter but actually, in terms of her recent operation, her mother, the person who is really responsible for getting her beyond rejection.

Doubtless a point that irked, similarly, in *Beyond Humanity* is my careful description of the chimpanzee Go-Go's erect penis as looking like an old style, ivory-barreled, antique douche. Two chapters later, Candy Darling casually mentions that she did have intercourse with Go-Go, in a vain attempt to save something from the last non-human ape on earth, who is about to die from diseases, and whose mind at least is eventually saved by Candy Darling still later, in the sacrifice of her own existence in the gift of her body. Tor Books was a little taken aback at my chimpanzee rampant description and remained obdurate even though I sent them photographic evidence, from a Dutch Primate Installation, that bore out the accuracy of my characterization. (Debbie Notkin wrote that she had, however, posted the evidence on a Tor bulletin board.)

What about violence? In *Beyond Rejection* there are two apparent offstage murders and one apparent onstage one, but all this turns out in the denouement to be a psychodrama which allows Candy and the rest of the medical personnel to wed together my protagonist, Sally Forth, mind-and-body, she. In *Beyond Humanity*, similarly, birth and love is the theme, and absolutely no one is killed, though there is quite a lot of action that threatens violence, and a sole death, Candy's, is old age and rebirth. In *Beyond Gravity*, the final novel of the trilogy, I was so beaten down by the antixist attitude of if that I allowed my agent, who indeed had my best material interests at heart, to convince me not to let my protagonist, who was composed of Sally Forth's old male body and her original, once female-bodied mind, make love to the brilliantly intelligent, extra-terrestrial monkey-bodied "anthropologist," who will

play the Hiawatha role and also save Ismael Cadmus's life. By this time I had also given up on any description of sexual organs.

What is it about science fiction and fantasy, and this surrounding culture of ours, that my agent and editors, who are surely the best and the brightest and even the gentlest in the field, should react so strongly against single lines describing, accurately and without pandering, the appearance of a human clitoris and a chimpanzee's erection. Remember, these are people who agent and edit books in which the norm is a lot of killing, often with a line or five of explicit description of wounds or death blows—though not usually the relentless page after page after page description of violence, which legitimizes a lot of sexual overtones by obscenely intermingling it with tension, fear, and excitement, thus ensuring detumescence and peter-meter failure, and dubiously intertwining unsatisfied sexuality with violence and tense excitement.

I said that I deserved the hardcore pornography label. Why? Because the hardcore pornography movie is the least violent of all movie, video, and TV forms, including children's TV, prime time, and daytime movies.

Not a single person gets killed in 99.5% of pornography movies. Indeed, in contradiction to all the forms I've mentioned, natural death is more common in pornographic films, perhaps approaching one percent, though the death usually occurs before and premises the film—memoirs of the legendary sex goddess, the conflicts of the claimants to the Will, etc. Nor is the percentage any better than half one percent so far as threatened or active employment of guns, knives, or axes go; bloodless, perfunctory fist fights may reach the one percent level. That it's all *terribly* American is further suggested by the field's own term for the tiny number of pornographic films that have physical violence—they are "crossovers," i.e., attempts to season pornographic films with elements of the ubiquitous violence of the other popular art forms of our culture. Barring crossovers, about the best one can hope for is an emotional argument or sharp verbal exchange between spouses or lovers or office workers, and these occur in a substantial majority of full-length pornographic films, though they will usually take only a few few-minute intervals in the film.

To generalize, for most of us, and certainly for me, the pornographic film is like real life in these respects and the other forms are not. I have never killed anyone, nor seen anyone killed in my presence; I have never attacked or been attacked with a gun, knife, axe, or more exotic weapon, though I once saw someone hold a knife in a threatening fashion toward someone else. Though I did have a few fist- and wrestling fights in the intermediate grades and one in high school, I have not had a physical fight as an adult, though I was on the peripheries of several in London and New York bars, mostly in my twenties and thirties.

On the other hand, over the past 40 years, and I expect your experience has been similar, I have had sexual intercourse thousands of times, often violating St. Aquinas' missionary-position-only rule, masturbated in like numbers, have had at least several hundred if not thousands of sharp verbal or strong emotional exchanges, and urinated and looked at my genitals on a daily basis. (Parenthetically, respecting chimpanzees, my experience is naturally more limited, but I certainly have seen males rampant several times, and the seven-year-old female, Moja, with whom I spent several hours a day for nearly two weeks, went into estrus for the first time then and while not actually presenting, she did gracefully guide me into the spoon position for a nap; while she slept, I felt her warm body curled up from my belly to my chin, her trusting head pillowed on my right arm, my left held by hers around her breast bone, my fingers mingled in her sleek, straight, wiry hair.)

You may argue that while pornographic films may be much more realistic than other genres about violence in our everyday, middle-class U.S. lives over the past few decades, nonetheless, such films exaggerate the frequency, variety, and ecstasy of sex by comparison with our actual lives. If we are to trust Kinsey, and his work—and we have little else to trust in this notoriously antierotic Christian-European civilization of ours, which did in Kinsey's research and continues to make such research almost unfundable—we have to conclude that pornographic films are not far from normal respecting frequency and variety. (Exception: Kinsey's interviews suggest that perhaps something like half of U.S. males have, as adults, experienced climax with a male partner; you would not get this impression from non-gay pornographic films, which

leave this human possibility emphatically out.)

Respecting frequency this may in part reflect a convention of realism that is near mandatory in the form: viz., the male must be seen to ejaculate, in a proof positive closure, at the end of every act of intercourse, and he is not depicted as recommencing after a few minutes, though in fact this possibility is well within the normal range of male variability, particularly in the late teens.

In the accounts given in the pornographic sex manuals, perhaps the primary form of literature of ancient Islam, India, and China, as one might expect in more normal and less anti-sexual cultures, we find the male of an evening having several ejaculations or practicing withdrawal so as to satisfy several or even scores of partners before depositing his supposedly thus enriched seed in his primary wife. If you worry, as well you might, about the pornographic film's apparent exaggeration of sexual ecstasy, do not bridle at the word 'satisfy' please, for these ancient manuals also emphasize the great importance of the female orgasm, often suggesting that lack of female satisfaction will bring, however much the female not wish this, all manner of well-deserved disasters on the family or the community, bringing on infertility, discord, worms, ill-health, and all manner of vengeful demons and goddesses; in traditional Hinduism, the belief was common that if a woman should have an intact hymen when she marries, she will do her husband serious damage, perhaps ruining him forever. After a 19th century in which the male MDs of our civilization confidently maintained that no normal, unperturbed female could even experience a single orgasm or indeed enjoy sex in any way whatsoever, Masters and Johnson had but to conduct the first actual laboratory study of sexual technology to discover that the normal human female, given some help and half a chance, can often be multiply-orgasmic and is more easily and physiologically more intensely so with dildo or vibrator technology.

Masters and Johnson could well have suspected this after reading the ancient sex manuals, in which such claims were commonplace (particularly if one accepts the *ween-ting* balls as a kind of, admittedly nonelectric, vibrator). Our pornographic film is the reappearance of the ancient sex manuals, and erotic art and technology. Perhaps the most archetypal plot of our hardcore films is this: Husband and wife are frustrated. Husband wants some physical variations that St. Thomas placed under interdiction. He is unable to present his desires well or at all attractively. He is inept at foreplay and doesn't realize this and doesn't pick up on his shy wife's attempts to explain. Neither can communicate with the other, which is something that Masters and Johnson confirmed respecting married couples who volunteered to perform before them and thought, quite wrongly, especially on the male's part, that they had communicated well and understood each other. The cinematographic husband storms off and has an affair, from which he learns some technique and emotional understanding. The wife discovers his affair and storms off to have one of her own, from which she too learns. The couple are reunited and become far more successful and satisfied together sexually, the woman not only orgasmic but multiply so. The End. This plot is much like the stories from the ancient sex manuals: while the two are unsophisticated fantasy in rather different styles, both modern and ancient pornography sincerely aim at the same primal satisfactions.

In short it is our civilization, not the pornographic film, that is out of step respecting reality and ecstasy. To at last present my interpretation of Professor Putnam's attitude, we have made a religion of violence in which sex is only allowed as violence's handmaiden and object. It is explicitly left out or perverted let in, Aphrodite, and the larger Goddesses that preceded her, are not to be mocked. They have taken and will take their toll, as Ares, shamed, beaten, and mocked in the *Iliad*, comes to know full well.

I expect you can see my mild deconstruction project already. These theses which follow may be ordered in a number of different ways.

1) Along with weapons and agriculture, humanity's first technologies were erotic. Artificial male and female organs, erotic foods, drugs, art, narrative and practices, erotic training and educational programs for both male and female, and the use of professional initiators and practitioners, are ubiquitous in the majority of preliterate societies. Roughly, the less of these practices, the more that violence will abound and be praised.

2) Given that the alphabet is the first information-processing

Read This

Recently read and recommended by

Roger Zelazny:

A half-dozen of the better books I've read recently have been:

Secrets of the Temple, by William Greider. An extensive and intensive history of the Federal Reserve up through the October 1987 collapse of the stock market.

A Stroll With William James, by Jacques Barzun. An engaging study of a philosopher many may talk about but few seem to read these days.

Idanre and Other Poems, by Wole Soyinka. The title poem tells the creation myth of Ogun, the Yoruba God of Iron, and allegorizes the Nigerian uprising of 1965. Contains some striking imagery.

The Soul of the Night, by Chet Raymo. If Loren Eiseley had been an astrophysicist rather than an archaeologist I think he'd have sounded this way. A fine, well-written collection of essays on astronomical subjects.

Backtracking: The Way of a Naturalist, by Ted Lewin. An engrossing collection of essays by a New Hampshire naturalist.

Hackney, by Edward R. Jones. Autobiog of a man who'd escaped from various jails and prisons 14 times during a 20-year period. He wound up becoming a writer.

technology, it is important to realize that its first widespread use over the Indian subcontinent and through China and Southeast Asia is as erotica, as combination manuals and stimulants, decorated with religious fountains that suggest religion itself was largely erotic. Sei Shonagan, writing *Pillow Talk* in 11th Century Heian Japan, gives us a witty and helpful guide to good conduct in a lover. Particularly wearisome, she for example mentions, is the lover who sneaks out from your bed at five o'clock in the morning, and who might claim that he left without a lingering caress not to wake one, but who, having mislaid his wallet, starts knocking things over in a vain and increasingly clumsy fashion. Murasaki Shikibu, who authored *Tale of Genji*, the world's first romantic novel and Japan's equivalent of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Dante's *Inferno*, was Sei Shonagan's younger, more romantic but more reserved, critic in the Heian court. Both unquestionably shared the view that sexual love, almost invariably, or at least mostly, outside even the possibility of matrimony, is the most fulfilling, exciting, and most strongly desired, of all life's possibilities. In their society there were widespread use of masks and the body was cloaked, so that letters and poems were primary channels for erotic display and sexual caress, at least in the preliminary courtship, if we believe anything Sei and Murasaki tell us.

In Japan's case my claim is clear cut. Only males were allowed to write in the thousands of Chinese ideograms, so Sei and Murasaki were the first to write, significantly and foundationally, in the Japanese syllabic alphabet, hiragana. So the first Japanese information-processing technology is dedicated to erotics. The Floating World woodcuts of the 17th and 18th century constitute one of Japan's greatest art achievements; they are pure pornography, just the sort of thing to send the peter-meter soaring.

3) When we come to literate cultures more generally we find that a number of technological developments and substantial resources, comparatively speaking, are dedicated to this. Indian and Oriental civilizations exemplify this, at least before later Confucianism and colonializing Christianity forced them underground. But it might be argued that Christian European civilization is the one real oddity, though admittedly one that has spread through musket, mortar, and

machine gun to shame and inhibit, when not simply genocidally eliminating, the rest of the world.

4) Our culture so rejects the exposure and depiction of our genitalia that we have been robbed of any real sense of what's good looking, or bad, or what's typical or what's rather distinctive in this or that way, or what's what in any way at all.

5) Think what we could hope for if our culture were not so anti-sexual. The amount of money and artistic talent that we dedicate to sexual ecstasy is, as a percentage, minuscule compared with previous cultures. We could undoubtedly produce effective, and multiply sensual, aphrodisiac drugs. We could make really effective sexual marionettes, with warmth, skinlike feel, recorded sound, and moving parts. We could make really good pornographic films with large budgets and well paid and honored professional actors. We could, above all, provide adequate, and adequately erotic, sexual education, training, and initiation. We could finally, to adapt Susan Sontag's phrase, be done with interpretation, and have an erotics of art, and artful erotics. The pre-Christian civilizations would find all this perfectly familiar and necessary. They also, to a large degree, recognized and more or less accepted homosexuality, transvestitism, and sexual surgery. (Circumcision and castration are perhaps the earliest forms of elective surgery; in some cases the latter was chosen for psychological comfort, though the more usual reason was parental knowledge that a circumcised male could make a quantum leap in income and social standing.)

A professional colleague of mine recently told me of his sexual

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Bullough, Vern L., *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (New York: John Wiley, 1976).
Kinsey, Alfred C., Wardell B. Pomeroy and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948).

initiation at age nineteen, the age the male's sexual powers begin to start to decline. The 40-year-old, badly-routed prostitute came through the grimy hotel room door and said, "You better get your clothes off quick, sonny. I haven't got all day." He went through the nervous act but had, he told me, no erotic feeling of any sort. I can think of few more telling indictments of our civilization.

The void captain's ship, Spinrad tells us, moves through hyperspace only when its human female engine has an orgasm. This does take it out of her—sex is always a little death but it is in a good cause. The captain, however, finds the attraction weirdly ungovernable and exciting; he joins her in ecstasy, which naturally leads to much greater exhaustion and warp failure and fictional destruction. The moral surely seems to be high church science fiction. Sex is dangerous and exhausting, but it's all right if it's useful in some totally non-erotic way; on the other hand, if anyone starts to enjoy it and joins it unnecessarily, grim disaster will follow. St. Thomas Aquinas would have loved it.

My moral is we could help ourselves, and our art and technology, to be a lot happier and a lot more honest. And to Katherine Maclean, wherever she is, thank you, thank you, thank you. ▴

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Good News from Outer Space by John Kessel

New York: Tor Books, 1989; \$18.95 hc; 402 pages

reviewed by Donald G. Keller

The Millennium is imminent, and with it, it seems clear, will come the millennial fever, the religious fervor, the turbulent unrest that the last millennium was once thought to have brought. As an occasionally predictive medium, science fiction has had its share of millennial novels; perhaps the most memorable was Robert Silverberg's *The Masks of Time* from 1968 (look for a reprint soon). In a sense Silverberg subverts the millennial theme by foregrounding the story of a time-traveler from the next millennium who, Loh-like, meddles in everything he encounters, bringing himself so much publicity that he refocuses the world's attention on himself as a Messiah; the template thus becomes a peculiarly Silverbergian gloss on Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

A harbinger of the inevitable spate of new millennial novels (two more have been published since), John Kessel's first solo novel (after *Pseudom Beach*, a collaborative novel with James Patrick Kelly, and the Tor Double of his Nebula-winning novella "Another Orphan") reverses Silverberg's figure and ground by focusing on the millennial fever (specifically its likely embodiment in Fundamentalism) and keeping his aliens peripherally at the margin (very like the Eumenides in Eliot's *The Family Reunion*, influencing the action behind the scenes), so much so that it could be argued that they don't even exist.

Are the aliens there? In each of their manifestations, they resemble humans (in most cases specific humans known to the actual humans they encounter), but their behavior is oddly and undeniably different; Kessel maintains the tension of ambiguity with great skill. Only their apparent shape-changing ability and control of the laws of chance give them away. If they are there, what are they up to? If I might modestly present my own theory, they seem to be practicing what we might call, for lack of a glibber term, psychological deconstruction. That is, they confront people with the contradictions and unfounded assumptions on which they have based their lives, and in so doing bring them, via a crucifixion that could be kindness, to epiphany and transformation. It is difficult to tell, though, even with this understanding, what the aliens'

overall purpose might be; Kessel keeps them firmly out of sight most of the time, rather like a persistent baseline one can hardly hear through the riot of noise going on over top, that proves to be there still once said noise dies down.

Kessel cleverly crosses the Edgar Rice Burroughs technique (which actually goes back at least to Ariosto) of alternating two or more main narratives with the Brunner (Dos Passos) technique of interleaving standalone vignettes into the main narrative, producing a mosaic of thirty-nine roughly equal chapters distributed across a year from April to April, climaxing on the December 31 that falls between them.

The two major characters are George Eberhardt, a reporter for the video equivalent of *Weekly World News* (which Kessel cites as a source) who is revived (a medical procedure in the same sociological niche as abortion today) after committing suicide, and goes in search of the aliens; and his wife Lucy, who loses her job over his revival, and whose own odyssey is stranger. Each occupies a quarter of the book. Another quarter is divided between the Reverend Jimmy-Don Gilray, a fundamentalist revivalist, and George's boss Richard Shrike, who becomes Gilray's co-prophet. Two chapters follow an investigator on George's trail, while the other four concern characters completely peripheral. There are a number of symmetries in the chapter-organization that provide a satisfying subliminal underpinning to the book's progress; also satisfying is the way the various strands intertwine into one towards the end as the story reaches its foregone conclusion in Zion (nfe Raleigh, NC) at the millennial moment.

Three of the four interpolations were published as separate stories earlier in the '80s: "Judgment Call," "Credibility," and "Mrs. Shummel Exits a Winner." Along with the stage-setting opening chapter, "Carla Hazard Entertains a Visitor from Out of Town," they provide some of the best moments in the book. Each is an intense, focused account of an alien encounter; each is also a meditation (alighly different each time) on the nature of luck—or probability, if you will; each ends with

a revelation or transformation of its protagonist through the medium of luck. But even the good luck is not without its price.

Is there a characterization problem in the book? John Ordover commented to me that not only could he not believe in the aliens, he could not believe in George, or any of the other characters, because all of them are either a) chemically or b) medically brain-damaged, and therefore not one is a reliable narrator. But the unreliable narrator is a device of honorable lineage, in the field and outside it (see Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, or Norman Spinrad's "No Direction Home," or Delany's *Trilog*, or Gene Wolfe's *Passions*), and all it depends on whether one enjoys the effort of triangulation from the welter of unreliable narrators here available to discover "the truth"—if there is one. Are they "quite empty of purpose and therefore lacking in genuine human interest," as Orson Scott Card says? My impression is that they are so focused on purposeful action that they seldom commit either habitual or gratuitous acts (to refer to the tripartite schema Samuel R.

Delany claims necessary—in *The Motion of Light and Water* and elsewhere—for fully rounded characters); and in the satirical context of this book they work perfectly well.

It remains to be said that this is a very funny book; Kessel is a deft parodist, and his wacky *Weekly World Newsworld* is full of clever takeoffs and extrapolations from the present day. But even the zanier stuff has barbs underneath, and on one level it is also a very serious book. It seems significant in this regard that the final chapter is a quiet coda, "all passion spent," the world transformed into something more organic, low-tech, slow, methodical, intuitive; the millennium came, but with a whimper. Even the alien encounter lacks the charged sense the previous ones had. Life goes on, much in the way it had centuries ago; perhaps, the implication goes, the whole twentieth century has been a blind alley. (And perhaps I am reading too much subtext into it.) The faint but clear last-line reference to Nabokov's last line in *Invitation* (neatly inverting the original's melancholia into serenity) is the perfect final flourish. ▴

Michael Swanwick Two Short Fiction Reviews

"Relics" by Zoe Fairbairns (*Despatches From the Frontiers of the Female Mind*, The Women's Press) is a good example of feminist science fiction as a divergent genre, a story that treats the tropes of our field as if they were found objects, employs them in ways alien to original intent, and is best understood on its own terms.

Coming to this genre fresh—*Despatches From...* is not a bad place to start—is like barging into a room where a brilliant conversation has been going on for hours. The words and ideas are flying, and there is a certain amount of back-reference that makes it risky for the newcomer to venture an opinion; so much ground has already been covered in our absence.

What Fairbairns brings to this conversation particular to her is a fluid, seemingly effortless ease of characterization. Going up and down the first page, one cannot easily detail at what point the characters cease to be words on paper and take on their own lives. But by page two, the reader already has strong and complicated opinions about Fairbairns' people.

Here is the voice of Greg Sargent, who wants to buy a feminist magazine and put it on a profitable basis by accepting advertising the protagonist finds offensive:

"You think today's woman can't laugh and turn the page if there's a silly ad? Well, she can. Not that she won't thank the advertisers in passing for keeping the price down for her and her less fortunate sisters who are on the dole. She *cares*. So don't go all prim with me about make-up. You think I wouldn't like to put make-up on some mornings? You'll have as many editorial pages as you've got now and I'll be relying on you to preserve the unique character of the magazine. Keep us straight. Tell me where to get off if necessary. If you don't, I'll fire you. I'm as much of a feminist as the next man, but I'm a businessman and I don't make donations to good causes. I make investments, and the fact that we're having this conversation should prove to you that you can stop fighting because you've won. Stop laughing."

Which is old Greg to a T, a man with a good mind and expensive shoes, as plausible as any pimp, a worthy adversary and dangerous victor, and underneath it all something of a stuffed shirt. Small wonder the protagonist, who is beginning to feel her age, who sometimes thinks that the magazine goes "a bit too far," and who is beginning to wonder if she isn't something of a relic of a forgotten cause, cannot bring herself to turn him down flat.

The problem stated, the story cuts to a peace demonstration outside an army base. Nuclear war begins and the women are bonded higgledy-piggledy into cryogenic storage tanks and frozen into the far future. (There is a hint that this is just a ruse the military employs to get the feminists out of their hair, but this is more in the nature of a sidelong joke, and Fairbairns gives it no particular emphasis.)

The sf elements, however, are rung in perfunctorily, with no attempt whatsoever at plausibility. Quite the contrary. Their explicitly metaphorical nature is pointed up any number of times, as when the protagonist's fellow activists are roused from cryogenic slumber. They are thawed not by technology but by the heat of their righteous wrath:

I advise Mr Constable to get on with defrosting the others. One by one they come out of their cabinets, weighed down and immobilised by their icy shrouds. But once Mr Constable has explained about the Department of Relics, the renewable fence, the Viewing Platform and the missiles on the moon, no further action is required to melt them. They stand before him like a row of blowtorches.

With the introduction of science fiction comes a corresponding (and typically smooth) shift from the literal to the figurative. Sister St Laur, for example, is both convent school teacher and feminist member telescoped into one woman. Her sister activists serve as a sort of chorus. And then of course there is the abovementioned Mr Constable.

Mr Constable of the Department of Relics is an amalgam of unpleasant male characteristics: prissy, peevish, demanding, dithering and weak. He is convinced of his superior authority while at the same time disguising it with heaping mouthfuls of half-digested feminist jargon. He refuses sex with the protagonist because "It would be an act of conquest," and after she has her way with him anyway, babbles of "Penetration, invasion, war . . ." The protagonist's common-sense response ("You want to start a war?"), the act of sex, her announcement that she may be pregnant—nothing is enough to jolt him out of his self-absorption.

He's bought the talk, but misses the point. For all this aggressively professed good will, he demands his right to reduce feminism to an historic tableau. It is the only way he can deal with women. Similarly, one of the Department's exhibits is an elephant with one foot tethered to a stake, so that it "limps an endless circle." He cannot see the elephant any way other than abstractly.

"By slightly restricting her liberty," Mr Constable explains, "we can give her much greater freedom, train her better and make her life more interesting in the long term. After the meeting I should like to show you my research archive. It may be that there is some help you can give me, identifying documents, and so forth. Some of them are very puzzling."

Here's the protagonist's personal dilemma laid bare, and the reason for her trip. It would be a mistake to think that she is *literally* in the future. Rather, this is in the nature of a thought-experiment, a simplification using sf elements as brain tools in order to see more clearly. The not-so-innocently-named Mr Constable may be no more than Greg Sargent's cardboard shadow, but insights gained through him can be

applied back in present time.

By the traditional definitions, this is not science fiction. It has nothing to do with the dance of technology and humanity. It does not share our concerns and presumptions, and treats such hallowed conventions as frozen sleep and the sinisterly transformed future with frank amusement.

But of course the genre to which it belongs is not science fiction, though it bears a strong family resemblance. As if "Relics" is curiously structured, the opening scene superbly characterizes the ultimate fate of its people not even touched upon. But on its own terms, it is rounded, evenly weighted, eminently sensible and easily approached from the outside. Good story.

Tarkovsky's *Solaris* the Second Time Around Briefly Noted by Richard Terra:

A new, uncut print of *Solaris* is now in circulation on the U.S. repertory cinema circuit. Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky's film adaptation of the novel by Stanislaw Lem was first released in 1972, and promptly won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes.

The running time of that original version of *Solaris* was 2 hours 47 minutes. But when the film finally premiered in New York in 1976, about 35 minutes of the film had been edited out. The cuts were not supervised by Tarkovsky, but were done by an independent film editor hired by the U.S. distributor without the Soviet director's approval. Worse, the prints circulating among the U.S. repertory theatres in recent years were often even shorter; many of them contained footage cannibalized from other unauthorized versions with English dubbed in over the original Russian.

Those original distribution rights expired last year, and new prints of the original, uncut version are now available for the first time through Corinth Films and Kino International. The original Russian-language soundtrack is augmented by a new, more complete set of English subtitles.

Tarkovsky has produced many other memorable films, including *Andrei Rublev* (1966), *Nostalgia* (1983) and, in collaboration with the Strugatsky brothers, the film version of their *Roadside Picnic* under the title *Stalker* (1980). His adaptation of *Solaris* is fairly faithful to the broad outlines of Lem's novel, but there are substantial and significant alterations in both emphasis and pacing.

While Tarkovsky raises many of the same questions about the human quest for understanding and self-knowledge that Lem raised in his novel, Tarkovsky's answers to those questions are often at variance to those Lem offered in the book. The most significant departure is a lengthy Earthbound prologue to Kelvin's arrival on *Solaris*, in which Tarkovsky deals with Kelvin's relationship to his family and to his past. These elements are later used to explore questions concerning what it means to be human—and, in the case of Hari (Rheya in the English translation of the novel), what it means to *become* human.

Tarkovsky's film lacks the crisp urgency of Lem's novel; indeed, it partakes of a sort of slow, meditative visual unfolding that is rather alien to the American film-making tradition. Given the seemingly interminable length of some sequences in this film, one can easily understand why the previous distributors thought it necessary to do some editing for the U.S. market. But for better or worse, the excised material has been restored in this new print. This is the film as Tarkovsky intended it, and as it won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes in '72. It's worth seeing the whole film at least once. ▶

"On the Far Side of the Cadillac Desert With Dead Folks" by Joe R. Lansdale (*Book of the Dead*, Mark Ziesing Books, and Bantam) is not for everyone. It is uniformly offensive, frequently disgusting, blasphemous in parts, and hard to stomach throughout. As Lansdale clearly intended.

In structure, this is a tough-guy spaghetti Aftermath tale, written for a shared-universe anthology of sorts, featuring stories set in the world of George Romero's *Living Dead* movies. But in Lansdale's vision, the insatiable, flesh-eating zombies—homely called "dead folks"—are the least threatening element of the environment. The living are far more dangerous, sinister, threatening, and randomly violent. They, in fact, routinely wire shut the jaws of female zombies, chop their hands off, and place them in cages for an amusement called Dead Dancing.

It was that kind of place. The kind that had sprung up immediately after that stuff had gotten out of a lab upstate and filled the air with bacterium that brought dead humans back to life, made their basic motor functions work and made them hungry for human flesh; made it so if a man's wife, daughter, sister, or mother went belly up and he wanted to turn a few bucks, he might think: "Damn, that's tough about ole Betty Sue, but she's dead as hoot-owl shit and ain't gonna be needing nothing from here on out, and with them germs working around in her, she's just gonna pull herself out of the ground and cause me a problem. And the ground out back of the house is harder to dig than a calculus problem is to work, so I'll just toss her cold ass in the back of the pickup next to the chain saw and the barbed-wire roll haul her across the border and sell her to the Meat Boys to sell to the tonks for dancing."

"It's a sad thing to sell one of your own, but shit, them's the breaks. I'll just stay out of the tonks until all the meat rots off her bones and they have to throw her away. That way I won't go in some place for a drink and see her up there shaking her dead tits and end up going sentimental and dewey-eyed in front of one of my buddies or some ole two-dollar gal."

Once we recover from the truly stunning vulgarity of that passage (and it is weak stuff, taken in context), we have to admire the writing, that wonderfully exaggerated Texas Redneck voice made into a kind of music. Lansdale plays that steel-string regional syntax with the best of them.

The second thing we notice about this story is that with the best will in the world it cannot be taken literally. The psychological landscape through which it moves comes straight from the irrational, a wild montage of images inspired by Grade B horror movies, old *Czestoch* and *Eerie* black and white comics, and bottom-end pulp, chosen for emotional and visual rather than intellectual effect. As in this description of an artifact of the Chevy-Cadillac Wars:

The Cadillacs stretched for miles, providing the only shade in the desert. They were buried nose down at a slant, almost to the windshields, and Wayne could see skeletons of some of the drivers in the cars, either lodged behind the steering wheels or lying on the dashboards against the glass. The roof and hood guns had long since been removed and all the windows on the cars were rolled up, except for those that had been knocked out and vandalized by travelers, or dead folks looking for goodies.

This is a wonderful passage, and never mind that it makes no sense at all. Stop to analyze where we are and how we got here, and we will be left behind, standing beside our bags on the edge of the breakdown lane as the story roars wildly off toward the far drunken horizon.

So where are we?

We are, believe it or not, deep in the heart of Deconstruction country. Once we look beneath the roller-coaster surface, "On the Far Side of the Cadillac Desert With Dead Folks" makes sense only when

viewed as a commentary on the worldview of the narrative prose. In short, it is an examination of the redneck *Weltanschauung*.

There is much to be said about rednecks, though not here. For the sake of this review, it is sufficient to note that they are people who have been dealt out of the game even before they sat down to the table, and know it. The prime distinction between a redneck and a good old boy is that the redneck has decided not to be a nice guy about it. This is not unfamiliar literary territory of late, but where the Billy-Bob Briggs types have all brought into the image of the sentimental hell-raiser, Lansdale has a colder eye.

Lansdale dedicates the story, "For David Schell, a story of The Bad Guys and The Bad Guys." We've been warned. Here is the explanation for the hatred-derived tone of mocking absurdity, for the schoolboy blasphemy, for the macho posturing, exaggerated violence and arbitrary plot twists. Most of all, here is an explanation for the narrative attitude toward women.

There is a lot of talk about sex whenever the boys get together, an almost continual leering and drooling and slinging about of crude language. Every woman even mentioned in the story (and Lansdale explicitly includes the hero's mother) is a whore. The lone female character of any importance, in fact, is a fishnet-stockinged nun-whore

in an entire order of nun-whores.

Yet the only sexual act that occurs in the story is described in terms of dry, clinical disgust. The hero cannot maintain an erection, and must be prodded by electric shocks to give him the stimulation a woman cannot.

This is the heart of the story. Once this is established, things can wind down. Once the protagonist actually *does* get laid, and finds it an unhappy, unsatisfying experience, the plot quickly moves on to unmask the religious-and-scientific authority figure (for all authority is, after all, the same) as a shuck and a jive, the woman as deserving no better than a bullet to blow her away with, male camaraderie and a man's word as being the only things in life of any value (though not much), and life itself as a hollow game, hardly worth the candle. The protagonist's inner world has been revealed, dissected and pinned down on the table for your judgment.

Significantly, "On the Far Side of the Cadillac Desert With Dead Folks" ends with a fantasy of death, deep and inviting, with never a chance of resurrection. ▴

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Hyperion by Dan Simmons

New York: Doubleday Foundation, 1989; \$8.95 tp; 482 pages

The Fall of Hyperion by Dan Simmons

New York: Doubleday Foundation, 1990; \$8.95 tp; 517 pages

reviewed by Robert Killheffer

The Romantic poets of the early 19th century have received an awful lot of attention in the sf and fantasy world of late. In the past two or three years the films *Gothic*, *Haunted Summer*, and *Rising with the Wind* have focused on the famous Lake Geneva set of Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron and Claire Clairmont; Roger Corman's filming of Aldous's *Frankenstein Unbound* will appear soon. Tim Powers's *The Stress of Her Regard* (reviewed in issue #14), Paul West's *Lord Byron's Doctor*, and Kathryn Ptacek's *In Silence Sealed* did the same in print, and yet another novel—*Gothic Romance* by Emmanuel Carrère—is coming from Scribner's. Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Powers's *The Anubis Gates* and William Blake in Orson Scott Card's *Tales of Alvin Maker* have played lesser roles. Now Dan Simmons has turned to John Keats in his most recent and ambitious work: the twin novels *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*.

Though published separately and under different titles, these two books in fact comprise one coherent novel. Read independently, either would be incomplete, but there are good reasons for their separation (not least of which is their sheer size). Simmons has taken as his thematic models two long but unfinished Keats poems of the same titles (*The Fall of Hyperion* is Keats's later attempt to rewrite his original *Hyperion*). Simmons uses *The Canterbury Tales* as a formal model for the first volume; each of the main characters relates his or her story as they make their pilgrimage to the world of Hyperion. But in the second volume the form is taken from Keats's *The Fall of Hyperion*. Keats placed himself Dante-like into this second version of his epic, and subtitled it "A Dream," and Simmons's book is narrated by a cybed reincarnation of Keats, who mysteriously dreams the events occurring among the pilgrims on Hyperion. This sharp change of structure and narrative voice distinguishes the two volumes, altering the tone and significance of the action, without breaking the continuity of the larger novel.

"I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death," wrote Keats upon starting his *Hyperion*, and it is impossible to escape the sense that Simmons had something similar in mind with his own. Keats clearly saw his poem as his first masterpiece, his first work to stand with the best that had come before, his ticket to immortality. Simmons betrays something of his own hopes in the character and voice of the poet Martin Silenus (with whom Simmons clearly identifies): says Silenus of his own masterwork, *The Hyperion Cantos* "Hyperion was the first serious work I had done in many years and it was the best I would ever

do... an epic tour de force in an age of mediocre force... written with a skill I could never have attained, with a mastery I could never have gained, and sung in a voice which was not mine" (*Hyperion*, pp. 224-225).

Simmons has poured as much into these two novels as is poured into ten average books. Each pilgrim's story in *Hyperion*'s framed episodic structure contains enough inventive detail, interesting well-developed characters, and compelling plot for a novel or two. *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* include a vast array of popular sf concepts woven together into a believable and unique mixture—faster-than-light travel and communication, instantaneous transport portals, time travel, super-powerful AI computer systems embedded in a cyberspace of virtual reality, artificial reconstructions of historical figures in computer systems, clones, God as an ultra-intelligent computer, interstellar barbarians—you name it. Simmons's themes run from love, death, order and chaos, to religion and the human relationship to God. The sheer complexity and the success of this background are impressive enough, but Simmons has also included allusions to countless works of literature from beyond the sf sphere: Shakespeare, *Beowulf*, Chaucer, Dante, Milton, Homer, Eliot, Yeats, Dylan Thomas and *The Scarlet Letter*, to name a few. These, for the most part, blend with each other and the sf material smoothly and convincingly; and if a few of the references seem strained, as if Simmons is trying to pack the phone booth with just one more person, the general effectiveness of the allusions give these books a stunning breadth and depth. The marriage of these references to a purely sf, at times almost space-operaic, framework is a parity that alone makes this pair of novels a pleasure.

Yet, for all their grandeur and sweeping scope, for all of their one thousand pages and soaring ambition, and for all of their successes, Simmons's books are consistently marred by comparative trifles, inconsequential in each individual instance, forgivable perhaps one by one, but which produce an aggregate frustration in the reader. There are awkwardnesses of language, inconsistencies, and repetitions, any and all of which could have been corrected by Simmons in revision, or by his editors with a pencil and some polite suggestions.

For instance, page 139 of *Hyperion* bears the line "The fact that essential technologies were essentially frozen in place..." a synonym for the second use of "essential" would have been better. Not long thereafter, we find "The damned tail wobbled, banged against his

helmet bubble, and was a literal pain in the ass" (p. 154). Silenus's publisher describes hamburger as "dead cow meat," as if this future society views such foods as quaint and faintly distasteful; but throughout the two novels, everyone seems to find roast beef sandwiches acceptable without comment. Earlier on, Simmons says "in the Lussus hive societies, the individuals respond to their class category followed by a simple code" (pp. 58-59), but when we see society on Lussus and learn that one of four main characters comes from that planet, we see no sign of such a peculiar custom. The most egregious example comes from *The Fall of Hyperion*: on page 337, Sek Hardon, leader of the eco-conscious Templar sect, is speaking with Father Paul Duré about the guilt of humanity in its relationship to the universe:

"... The same arrogance which has caused our race to destroy all species that might even hope to evolve intelligence someday. The Seneschai Aluit on Hebron, the zeplens of Whirl, the marsh centaurs of Garden and the great apes of Old Earth. ..."

"Yes," said Duré. "Mistakes have been made. But that shouldn't sentence humankind to death, should it?"

Not much later, Simmons returns to this conversation (p. 370):

"We eradicate competing forms of intelligent life."

"Such as?"

"Such as the Seneschai empatha on Hebron, the marsh centaurs of Garden. . . . We did not terraform Whirl, but the Jovian lifeforms there were hunted to extinction . . . like the great whales of Old Earth."

Duré folded his hands. "Agreed, there have been injustices. But surely there is a better way to right them. . . ."

I can see no excuse for this repetition but plain sloppiness. Most of the time (as he has in his other novels) Simmons took my breath away in these books; but again and again, these minor problems broke the spell.

Nevertheless, the strengths and weaknesses of Simmons's novels transcend these issues of craft. Simmons is not merely playing word games with us here; throughout *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* it is the complexity of the theme that generates the greatest fascination and the greatest expectation, and in which we see the significance of Keats and the other Romantic poets to Simmons and to other recent writers.

These two books address an old theme of sf, treated in countless novels and stories such as van Vogt's *Slan*, Pohl's *Man Plus*, and Sturgeon's "More Than Human"—future human evolution and its impact on the individual in transition. Though set in the 28th century, Simmons's Worldweb, the interstellar empire of humankind, bears many resemblances to our own world. In the opening scene of *Hyperion* the survival of modern culture and tradition in this alien future landscape is startlingly clear: "The Hegemony Consul sat on the balcony of his ebony spaceship and played Rachmaninoff's Prelude in

C-sharp Minor on an ancient but well-maintained Steinway while great, green saurian things surged and bellowed in the swamps below" (p. 3). In the stories of each of the pilgrims, Simmons supplies further details of the Worldweb civilization; and just as each character's story shows their surface appearances to be oversimplified and false—the hard-bitten soldier is also an idealist with a deep hatred for war, the poet spent most of his years as a bestselling hack writer—we learn that the Hegemony is not a benign peaceful state threatened by the evil Ouster barbarians, but a stagnant technocracy that has ruthlessly suppressed efforts at independence on its many worlds, and shamelessly exploited delicate ecosystems on those same worlds. The Ousters may in fact not be the bad guys after all; they may represent a necessary force of change and freedom.

At this point, and in all of the second volume, the truly central issue appears. The humans of the Hegemony fear their overthrow at the hands of the Ousters, who, we find, have been evolving into beings better adapted to life in space and on other worlds. At the same time, many of the AIs of the datasphere have come to the conclusion that humanity is no longer necessary to their plans and wishes to exterminate all human beings. And on top of that, other AIs have been working to build what they call the UI, the Ultimate Intelligence, which will be able to factor every piece of data in the galaxy and thus predict every event; this UI will, however, occupy all available space in the datasphere if it is ever built, and this will mean the deaths of the existing AIs. In every case, the issue is that of change, of the necessity for evolutionary growth, and the problems faced by those destined to pass. On a more abstract level, it is the problem faced by parents, dedicating their lives and time to preparing their offspring and their world for a future they cannot share. In further abstraction, it is also the general problem of personal maturation, the struggle of individual spiritual growth.

Science fiction has traditionally held that such evolution is necessary and good; that the individual must learn to accept and indeed embrace the new order, to attempt to better the world through change. In fact, for the most part of its Golden Age, it carried forth the nineteenth-century view that science and technology were destined to solve the problems of the world; that change and evolution would tend overall toward improvement. More recently, the potential for negative change was recognized widely, and tales of nuclear holocaust and environmental disaster were common. But in many cases, change was judged by its end result, while the troubles attendant with the process of change were ignored. (The three examples mentioned above are exceptional.) In the last decade or so, however, this has become the central issue of much of sf: the focus has shifted to the nearer future, and to the problems faced by individuals in changing societies, and it is in this perspective that I see the most telling connection between modern sf and the poems of the Romantics.

In his *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats hoped to write the story of the fall of the Titans at the hands of the Olympians from Greek mythology. Keats started planning *Hyperion* with the idea that "Growth is the law of life; and in the sum of time its direction is upward—from

Dave Langford Postscript to "Muddying the Waters"

As it turned out, many of the article's queries and speculations (in *NTRSF* #21) were more or less answered when (after bitching to his publishers) I heard indirectly from the great man himself. Apparently he never even saw my book. Apparently Whitley Strieber, the most famous UFO pundit in the entire universe, does his research in such quick-buck compilations as *The World's Strangest Mysteries*. This instant reminder from Octopus includes the exact same text and typography as the earlier rip-off of my book in *The World's Greatest UFO Mysteries*, complete with a misquote about the manuscript's "authenticity." (Nigel Blundell, compiler of

both books, believes in recycling his own as well as others' writing.) And therefore, the US publishers' lawyers triumphantly concluded, I have absolutely nothing to complain about.

... Except that even this debased text says quite clearly that the Loosley MS was hidden "for nearly 160 years" since 1871, and gives enough information for even a feebly conscientious researcher to get in touch with me. Dear old Whitley just wrote to Octopus and, getting no reply, went right ahead and used the story anyway.

However, it does look as though future editions of *Mysteries* will carry, on the copyright page, a proper acknowledgement to my book. That leaves me happier, if no richer.

¹By presumably, Nigel Blundell and, conceivably, Roger Boar: Octopus, London, and Gallery, New York, 1987.

chaos to order, from darkness to light" (Aileen Ward, *John Keats: The Making of a Poet*, rev. ed. [NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1986], p. 219). But as he experienced more of life while researching and outlining the poem, his conception changed, so that he left the poem unfinished after reaching the point where the central evolution occurs in the person of Apollo: "... this conception had grown immensely complicated in the months since Keats began pondering his epic. Not the glory but the cost of the struggle preoccupied him now" (Ward, p. 219). Keats began to reject the simple beliefs of his contemporaries in the unquestionable good of growth; he began to see that change itself occasioned much suffering, that maturation in individuals as in civilizations was a painful experience, and that the more realistic and pertinent issue was how to endure this necessary change. With this new plan in mind, he began *The Fall of Hyperion*, but his worsening health prevented him finishing much of it before his death.

Simmons has allied himself with Keats in exploring the same question, and in fact the struggle of spiritual growth has preoccupied him before. His World Fantasy Award-winning first novel, *Song of Kali*, shares many elements with the *Hyperion* novels. The monstrous and mysterious Shrike of Hyperion parallels the cruel goddess Kali—they are gods of pain, symbols of the inevitability of suffering in life, of the seemingly random violence and destruction visible in the universe. Robert Luczak of *Kali* shares his profession of poet with Martin Silenus, and his concern for his threatened daughter with Sol Weintraub. Luczak's troubles are related to the issues of the *Hyperion* books: a natural optimist, Luczak has had little experience of suffering and dramatic change in his life; he is like the Worldweb, settled and stagnant. The pain he suffers and the disasters that befall him tear his worldview apart, and leave him suicidally depressed; but by the end of *Song of Kali*, Luczak has come to terms with these events, and in fact a more mature and stronger person because of it. Change is necessary and its pain is unavoidable, but it may lead to improvement.

So it would seem that Simmons's interest in this problem made Keats's poems seem the perfect vehicle for a grander effort to resolve the issue. But Keats himself never did resolve it; he never finished *Hyperion* nor *The Fall of Hyperion*, and Simmons's *Hyperion* novels have their greatest difficulty in their conclusion. By the end, the problem has been carefully and completely elucidated, the various conflicts have been racing toward a finish which promises to tie together the political machinations of the Hegemony government, the Outers and the AIs; Sol Weintraub's musings on ethics; the fates of humanity, the AIs, the

artificial construct of Keats that has narrated the second book and all the other central characters—in short, a stunning revelation of wisdom that will wrap it all up. What we are provided with instead is an example of what Norman Spinrad has called "a burst of unconvincing transcendentalism, an endemic filling of otherwise successful science fiction time out of mind" (*Asimov's*, June 1990).

Love, that most banal of things, that most clichéd of religious motivations, had more power—Sol now knew—than did strong nuclear force or weak nuclear force or electromagnetism or gravity. Love was these other forces, Sol realized. The Void Which Binds, the subquatum impossibility that carried information from photon to photon, was nothing more or less than love (p. 492).

Frankly, I was horrified. Despite all the minor flaws of these books, despite a few moments of embarrassing excess (such as the final scene of *Hyperion* in which the pilgrims descend into the valley of the Shrike singing "We're Off to See the Wizard"), I was dazzled by Simmons's performance thus far; he had painted himself into a corner by the end, but I fully expected that he would dazzle me again by finding some way to finish the job cleanly and satisfactorily. With this business about love being "as hardwired into the structure of the universe as gravity and matter/antimatter," Simmons simply cheated, escaping the implications of reality as he has drawn it through this feel-good mysticism. And he didn't need to; in *Song of Kali*, he offered a completely realistic and satisfying thematic conclusion, leaving Luczak a wiser and more mature individual, rebuilding his life, acknowledging and accepting the necessary pain inherent in life. Something similar would have been far better here as well.

Simmons's *Hyperion* novels are a grand attempt to address one of the most significant themes in sf and in our world. Thematically and technically, Simmons has dared to attempt feats most writers are afraid to consider, and for all my qualms and quibbles, I feel I have been elevated by my experience of these books. With some more rigorous editing to iron out the few wrinkles, and a sensible and fulfilling conclusion like that of *Song of Kali*, these books would have approached greatness. As it stands, it is no perfect performance, but a flawed attempt at this height is more valuable and more interesting than an unblemished example of the mediocre. Simmons has not emerged from this venture unscathed, but he has taken no wounds in the back. ▲

Paper Spaceships and Robot Lovers: SF from East Asia Science Fiction from China edited by Dingbo Wu and Patrick Murphy New York: Praeger, 1989; \$18.95 hc; 176 pages

The Best Japanese Science Fiction Stories edited by John L. Apostolou and Martin H. Greenberg New York: Dember Books, 1989; \$16.95 hc; 176 pages reviewed by Richard Terra

There are few good English-language translations of East Asian literature; good translations of East Asian sf are practically nonexistent. All the more reason to welcome these two volumes, the only multi-author collections of Chinese and Japanese sf currently available in English. They offer a rare (although somewhat limited) look at contemporary East Asian sf.

Science Fiction from China is a collection of particular interest. The introduction by Wu Dingbo, a scholar of science fiction and American literature at a Shanghai University, is a remarkably thorough and informative essay on the origins, historical development and current state of Chinese sf. Wu also presents two lengthy bibliographies that list foreign sf works translated into Chinese and a chronology of major Chinese sf stories and novels published between 1904 and 1988.

SF from China contains eight stories by six authors. Their quality varies but all are of interest. (The quality of the translations is also decidedly uneven; some passages border on and at times cross over into the incoherent. The best are by Wu Dingbo, whose English is fluent and

elegant.) All but one of the stories were written between 1978 and 1983, a period of relative social, political and cultural liberalization in China. It was also an amazingly fertile and productive period for the Chinese sf community, a sort of golden-age flowering, which unfortunately ended in the reactionary campaign against "bourgeois liberalism" culminating in the mass protests and the Tien An Men massacre in the spring of 1989.

These stories are thus excellent examples of the complex interplay of politics, social change and the literary arts. Science fiction in China is still viewed as a low literary form, suitable only for educational purposes and juvenile entertainment within the strictures of the government's socialist realist guidelines. Translations of foreign sf have had a marked but decidedly limited influence: although a mixed bag of Soviet, Japanese and American works have appeared over the years, the most widely translated and well-known among them is still Jules Verne. The resulting literature is remarkably similar to the Gernsbackian "scientifiction" of American sf pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s.

The best among them, and the longest, is Wei Yashu's "Conjugal Happiness in the Arms of Morpheus." It is actually two stories: the first half was published in 1981 and a "Sequel" appeared the following year. The story has generated considerable controversy inside China, largely for its depiction of a non-utopian future.

"Conjugal Happiness" tells of a man living in an overpopulated near future China; forbidden to breed, he is allowed to choose a beautiful robot wife. Programmed with Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics, the wife's charming but servile obedience to his every whim soon leads to disaster. The story betrays only a superficial understanding of the implications of Asimov's Laws, and does not explore the more complex dilemmas of the long term versus short term harm implied in the interplay of the First and Second Laws (explorations that are made by Asimov himself in his own works, and particularly in Jack Williamson's "Humanoids" tales). But Wei's tale has other complexities of its own.

"Conjugal Happiness" is based on a plot common in traditional Chinese literature for centuries (a tradition dominated by male-oriented Confucian values): that of the upright man seduced and corrupted by a woman—whether wife, concubine, maid or prostitute—which leads to his degradation and downfall. We take this traditional plot and with a satirical twist turns it neatly on its head. By the end of the story the narrator has realized the oppressive folly of the traditional Confucian ideal of woman as servile, obedient—indeed, robotic:

Now I know that a natural human wife is much better than a robot wife because the former has her own thoughts and views. She is an independent person. She knows not only how to love her husband but also how to restrict him at a critical moment. She is endowed with the admirable, noble,

lovable, and crowning pearl of character: the ability to quarrel! (p. 26)

Unfortunately, the subtle effectiveness of this satire is almost completely undercut in the "Sequel," in which the husband, denied a divorce, converts his robot wife into a thinking, willfully independent woman through a strict regimen of socio-political philosophical education and a carefully altered diet. The sf trappings of the tale at this point collapse: what was necessary and used to clever satirical effect in "Conjugal Happiness" becomes wholly unnecessary sf claptrap and we are left with a simple tale of domestic conflict and reconciliation in which the narrator learns to see his wife as an equal, as a real human being.

The "Sequel" is strongly reminiscent of Lester del Rey's 1947 short story, "Helen O' Loy." Both are tales of men who transform their robot women into real human beings but then have difficulty accepting them as equals; in each, the sf veneer is largely unnecessary to the social and psychological transformation that takes place in the minds of men. Wei's tale is not as glib as del Rey's, and at least makes explicit the point that women are human beings and should be treated as such...

Finally, in passing, I should also note that "Conjugal Happiness" contains one of the best passages of educational "scientifiction" I have encountered in a long while. Describing his new-found love for his robot wife, the narrator rhapsodizes:

Between us there existed a wonderful circle which Newton's Law of Universal Gravitation could expound. Newton's Law says, "The gravitational attraction of two bodies is directly proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance

Read This Recently read and recommended by Vladimir Borisov:

The Soviet Club "Alkor" in Omsk conducted a poll of fans in the USSR to rate the best sf published in 1988.

In order of popularity, these are the winners and runner-up. In the lead are works by brothers Strugatsky and by Robert Shekley, as well as the stories by Andrei Stolyarov and Stephen King. From 26 foreign works, 9 translated by Alexander Koshchenskiy.

Best Novel, Novella:

Strugatsky, Arkady & Boris. *The Snail on the Slope*. (Smenn #11-15)

Strugatsky, Arkady & Boris. *Burdened with Evil, or Forty Years Later*. (Tynost #6-7)

Larionova, Olga. *Star-In-Forehead (Chakra Centaur)*. (Ural'skiy Sledopyt #1-4)

Bulychev, Kir. "The Settlement." (Author's collection *The Settlement*, Detskaya Literatura Publishing House, Moscow)

Yaroslavtsev, S. "Expedition to the Nether World." (Author's collection *Expedition to the Nether World*, Moskovskiy Rabochi Publishing House, Moscow)

Zamyatin, Yevgeny. *We*. (Znamya #4-5)

Savchenko, Vladimir. "The Thieves of Essences." (Author's collection *Thieves of Essences*, Radyanskiy Pismennik Publishing House, Kiev)

Stolyarov, Andrei. "The Third Babel." (Collection *The Day of Achievements*, Sovetskiy Pisatel Publishing House, Leningrad)

Zelnitskiy, Boris. *The Whole World in the Barn*. (Parus #10-11)

Golovachev, Vasilii. *Overlords*. (Ural'skiy Sledopyt #11-12)

Zhitinskiy, Aleksander. *A Subject of Britain*. (Aurora #1-2)

Rudenko, Boris. *Imprisonment in Eden*. (Izobrazitel'skiy Ration-alizator #1-4)

Savchenko, Vladimir. *The Fifth Dimension*. (Raduga (Kiev) #1-3)

Khlumov, Vladimir. "The Sanatorium." (Collection *The Sanatorium*, Molodaya Gvardiya Publishing House, Moscow)

Orlov, Vladimir. *Chemist*. (Navy Mir #5-7)

Nikitalskaya, Natalya. "Right Life, or Life According to All the Rules." (Collection *The Day of Achievements*, Sovetskiy Pisatel Publishing House, Leningrad)

Glants, Anatoly. "Week-days of Modest Pavlovich." (*Khimiya i Zhizn* #8)

Foreign Novel, Novella:

Shekley, Robert. *The Status Civilization*. (Znamie-Sila #4-8)

Lem, Stanislaw. *A Peace on the Earth (Pokój na Ziemi)*. (Zvezda Vostoka #9-10)

Zelazny, Roger. *Damnation Alley*. (*Khimiya i Zhizn* #10-12)

King, Stephen. "The Mist." (*Vokrug Seta* #4-7)

Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*. (*Radnik (Riga)* #3-6)

Vonnegut, Kurt. *The Sirens of Titan* (Author's Collection *The Sirens of Titan*, Universitetskoye Publishing House, Moscow)

Hamilton, Edmond. *The Star Kings*. (*Tekhnika-Molodystki* #5-12)

Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. (*Inostrannaya Literatura* #4)

Clarke, Arthur. *Childhood's End*. (*Khimiya i Zhizn* #4-7)

Lem, Stanislaw. "Professor A. Donda." (*Khimiya i Zhizn* #9)

King, Stephen. "The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet." (*Smenn* #24)

Kafka, Franz. *The Castle (Das Schloss)*. (*Inostrannaya Literatura* #1-3)

Rueffan, André. "Mémo." (*Izvesti* #4)

between them." So, in other words, the shorter the distance, the greater the attraction; the greater the attraction, the shorter the distance. Thus the centrifugal force increases exponentially while the distance decreases exponentially. That was the mathematical formula of our love.

Only the lovers head over heels in love can really know the holy powers of Newton's law. (p. 16)

Also of special interest in this collection are two stories by Ye Yonglie, one of China's most popular and prolific authors. Ye's tales are distinguished by a talent for characterization and a straightforward, rapid-fire narrative style.

The better of the two is "Corrosion," which tells of a team of scientists working to characterize and prevent the spread of a deadly, omni-corrosive bacteria brought back to Earth from space (a la *The Andromeda Strain*, which has appeared in China). While framing his tale with the desperate, race-against-time efforts of a pair of researchers working at an isolated laboratory in China's desert northwest, Ye focuses on Wang Chong, their colleague who remains behind. The story is a powerful character study as Wang's cities are slowly corroded by the attention, the academic promotions, and the rewards he receives for his role in the project—while his co-workers perish in the desert. Despite a rather pat ending, in which Wang realizes his errors and atones for them by going to man the desert research station alone, "Corrosion" is a remarkably candid portrayal of [the] way politics and personalities often influence scientific research. It is probably the most true-to-life story in the collection.

In his "Reap As You Have Sown," Ye "borrows" the characters from David Rovik's *In His Image: The Cloning of a Man* in a manner not uncommon in the long history of Chinese literature, but which would perhaps violate Western copyright laws. After summarizing the events of Rovik's novel as if they had actually occurred, ending with the birth of the billionaire Max's clone baby via a surrogate mother, Ye then proceeds with a tale of the clone's upbringing and eventual murder of his "father" in order to inherit his vast estate; the resulting legal battle leads to the clone's arrest. Ye's apparent ignorance of the U.S. legal system generates some truly ludicrous implausibilities, but overall "Reap" is a well thought out treatment of some of the possible legal and social consequences of cloning human beings. He also ends the story with a dark satirical twist: since the murdered billionaire Max declared in his will that his clone "is myself and the continuation of my life," the two are declared identical, the case is ruled a suicide and the clone is allowed to inherit the estate.

Also represented by two stories is Tong Enzheng, a Chinese archaeologist and a thirty-year veteran of sf writing. His "Death Ray on a Coral Island," immensely popular in China, is a techno-thriller pot-boiler concerning a brilliant but naïve scientist who has been duped into inventing death rays and other weapons by an evil multi-national corporation and the idealistic young Chinese hero who prevents the death ray from falling into the wrong hands. The predictable plot is revitalized by solid, unadorned storytelling.

Tong's other story, "The Death of the World's First Robot," is not really sf at all, but a retelling of a fourth century Chinese tale about an imperial courtier who builds a robot, which promptly falls in love with the Emperor's favorite concubine and eventually dries up a (literally) broken heart. (Wu Dingbo, in his introduction, claims the original legend is the world's "earliest robot story," but is apparently unaware of the Greek myth-tale of the bronze mechanical man built by Daedalus for King Minos to patrol the shores of Crete—a tale dating back to at least the fourth century B.C.)

Wang Xiaodan's "The Mysterious Wave" is a gadget story *par excellence*. It includes all the standard elements: a virtuous military-type hero, a ridiculous but nifty sounding pseudo-scientific apparatus ("information waves" which create false perceptions of sight, sound and smell), a brilliant elderly scientist and his obligatory beautiful daughter, and a nasty enemy spy. Aside from his left-leaning politics Wang's story could have appeared in any American sf pulp magazine from 1920 to 1950 or so. Since it seems unlikely that much (any) of the American low-grade pulp stories have ever been translated into Chinese, Wang appears to have independently reinvented the wheel (though perhaps Wang, a practicing scientist, is literate in English). What I'd like to know

is whether all these elements of bad adventure sf have spread by diffusion, or are they a fundamentally inevitable result of the "scientifiction" approach?

Of the remaining stories, Zheng Wenguang's "The Mirror Image of the Earth" has previously appeared in English (in the Penguin *World Omnibus of Science Fiction*). It is a slight tale: an advanced civilization shuns contact with humanity because of its propensity for violence and barbarity. But the style and imagery are noteworthy, the language (as least in translation) evocative.

The final story, "Boundless Love" by Jiang Yunsheng, is a bold stylistic experiment, quite unlike any of the other tales in the collection. The story—which concerns itself with the emotional relationship between a man and a woman who is the clone of his deceased but still beloved wife, but who does not share her memories of their past—is all the more interesting because it was first published in 1987. "Boundless Love" provides a hint that despite government censorship and crackdowns, Chinese SF writers are still experimenting behind the scenes; it offers hope for a second golden flowering of Chinese sf sometime in the years to come.

The Best Japanese Science Fiction Stories is somewhat misleadingly titled; over half the stories would be more correctly viewed as fantasy, not sf, but this does not diminish their interest—it merely requires a realignment of the reader's expectations. The volume also contains a brief historical sketch on Japanese sf literature, but it is not as thorough or as useful as that in *SF from China*.

The collection contains thirteen stories from ten authors—the window for viewing Japan being open a bit wider than that for China. And yet Japanese SF is frustratingly limited in scope. The stories are all relatively recent—dating from 1973 to 1989—save one; Hoshi's "Bokko-chan" appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & SF* in 1963, and its inclusion only points up the dearth of available translations. All of the authors represented were born between 1923 and 1935; Japanese SF represents Japanese science fiction only in the same sense an American collection including recent stories by, say, Williamson, Asimov, Sturgeon, and Pohl—but excluding any new authors born after 1940 or so (Delany, Herbert, Zelazny and anyone else who started writing in the last thirty years)—would represent current American sf; in short, not very well. One wonders about the work of younger Japanese sf writers.

As in the Chinese collection, the tales in Japanese SF are of variable quality, though the translations are uniformly smooth and polished. They are the result of years of work by a dedicated group of writers, editors and translators known as the *Honyaku Bunkyo*, and to the efforts of the anthology's two contributing editors, Judith Merril and Gran Davis. In translation, the language is often elegant, poetic—and at times a bit elusive.

Though by and large well-written, many of the Japanese tales are slight, simplistic, and at times annoyingly simple-minded. Ryo Hamamura's "Tansu," for example, is a short, atmospheric tale of a family succumbing to a peculiar madness: at night, everyone except the father climbs atop the household's tansu chests and falls into a zombie-like stupor until dawn. No harm results from this odd behavior; eventually, even the father joins his wife and children in their nocturnal eccentricity. It seems a rather trivial and ridiculous story—is it meant to be frightening? The element of inexplicable social madness seems to require some explanation, but none is offered.

The other tales in the collection seem equally simple-minded. Taku Mayumura's "Finifum" is an essentially plotless piece of sentimental, poetic fluff about a long-lived creature capable of displacing its awareness back and forth through time. Takashi Ishikawa's "The Road to the Sea" is the story of a boy in a desert land who sets out seeking the sea—but he dies when his oxygen runs out and he discovers he lives/dies on Mars. The prose and imagery are beautifully evocative, the fiktale presentation worth noting, but the twist ending insults the reader by asking that you accept that a six year old boy on Mars would not know that tales of the ocean referred to Earth, or that he knew nothing about the limitations of his oxygen supply even though he was able to don a pressure suit and slip out through an airlock to begin his trek.

Shinichi Hoshi's "Bokko-chan" is another tale of a robot beauty, this one built by a tavern owner. His glib patrons spend their evenings buying drinks for the empty-headed mechanical beauty, which the thrifty bar owner recycles from her innards and serves to other

Alexei Panshin
from *My Life in Rock'n'Roll*
Vol. One, Prehistory and Before

The Spiders
"Witchcraft"

Now this one you had to be there for, and I know you wish you had, because no one has heard of this one but me, and yet you've forgotten it already and shame on you. It was never a hit, unless you lived in the right neighborhood or had a radio that could pull in one of those over-the-border stations in Moose Jaw that bathed the northern United States in a non-stop cacophony of treble and rough underbelly music, probably financed by the Communists as part of their insidious and ultimately successful effort to subtly alter the brain structure of the common American peasant and you know the result of that.

In the chain of musical woodoo which links "That Old Black Magic" with "I Put a Spell on You," this record stands alone for its simplicity and monotony combined with pubescent fears of never being laid again or at all and epistemological uncertainty at being caught in the middle of the intersection with the light changing to red. Viz, the refrain, "My head is spinning, goin' around and around, well the witchcraft's got me, keep goin' down and down." Couple that with the inherent mysteriousness of a singing group from New Orleans that sounded black enough to pass in 1955 but probably wasn't, and you have a record that a high school freshman stumbling upon on the jukebox in the college grill might drop a quarter to play five times, regretting only that it wasn't "The Average Giffrific" by the Four Lads, a bunch of Canadian guys in their thirties, which was at least as mysterious yet annoying, and in its pseudo-Africanoidness was a retro-progressive song ahead of its time in returning to the true roots of rock'n'roll, even though nobody in those days really cared about anything but making a quick buck and if they heard what you're listening to today they would have wondered what the hell it had to do with them anyway.

But that's life for you. It doesn't make sense in any way, shape or form, but it's all cross-connected. Which brings us back to this record.

If Bob Dylan had intoned, "I can see it now. The fields are empty. Lyin' in the backseat of a '56 Ford Victoria's listenin' to 'Witchcraft' by the Spiders. That's when time stood still," he would have said it all. Only he didn't. It was Robbie Robertson, and all the names have been changed. And yet, the *producer* was the same guy, so there is some connection, after all. There always is.

Ya had to have been there—it can't be communicated and it can't be brought back. Thank God. But in early July 1988, I heard "Witchcraft" by the Spiders on an early morning radio show from Muhlenberg College. First time in 33 years. And it had me smiling two ways.

Add in that it is over 90° in April as I write this, and you'll know what I mean.

First release: Imperial, November 1955

customers. Eventually, one particularly dense suitor, heartbroken by her refusal to acknowledge his advances, serves her a poisoned drink; recycled and served all around, the poison wipes out the tavern's entire clientele. The worst element of this tale is the conclusion that somehow the robot, *a woman*, is somehow to blame, rather than the gullibility and sheer stupidity of the men. The tale comes off, at least to Western eyes, as a rather implausible affair of gloss on the traditional East Asian view of women as corrupted and corrupting.

Hoshi's other tale in the collection, "He-y, Come On Ou-ti," is 18 The New York Review of Science Fiction

more satisfying. It is a humorous parable about a mysterious bottomless hole that appears miraculously following an earthquake. The hole becomes a catch-all dumping place for garbage, toxic and radioactive waste, dead bodies, incriminating evidence and so on—until, at the very end, we find that the hole simply leads a few years into the future. The environmentalist message is clear, but the story approaches it in a curiously indirect manner and does not confront the problem of what *should* be done to protect the environment at all. A simple cautionary tale, it offers no solutions.

Kobo Abe offers a similar tale of disaster in his surrealistic fantasy, "The Flood," in which the world's human population begins to liquefy and brings about a new deluge (Abe, the author of the novel *Inter Udder Age 4*, seems to like the idea of a world-wide flood). The story is definitely not af, and hardly coheres enough to be considered a parable or fable, but is an elusive, irreverent vignette of apocalypse and destruction.

Another vision of apocalyptic destruction appears in Tensei Kono's "Triceratops," a tale of great descriptive charm. It tells of a "temporal fault" that allows a Japanese residential suburb to co-exist with a phantom herd of triceratops and their tyrannosaur antagonists. Many of its elements—the imagery, the setting, the relationship between a boy and his father that is the story's emotional center of gravity—are all strongly reminiscent of the fantasies of Ray Bradbury. Despite its quiet, understated style, however, "Triceratops" ends with a senseless and really rather ridiculous and implausible all-out bloodbath between triceratops herd and the tyrannosaurs.

A second cluster of stories in *Japanese SF* seems to concern itself with a profound sense of social alienation, with reaction against an increasingly dehumanized and regimented society. Ryo Hanamura's "Cardboard Box," for instance, is a humorous allegory of existential angst, of the driving need to be *filled*—as experienced by a cardboard box. Though a bit silly, the story asks whether it is possible for a sensitive individual to find fulfillment within a tightly regimented utilitarian society.

This sense of alienation is confronted more directly by Morio Kita in "The Empty Field," one of the most interesting stylistic experiments in the collection. With spare, impressionistic prose Kita tells of a young man returning to an empty wooded lot—now surrounded by the encroaching city—where he once played as a child, and is said to be the landing site of visiting flying saucers. Kita depicts the emptiness and self-deception of the young man and the others who come to wait, of people seeking something marvelous in which to believe. There is really no need for the twist ending in which, after all the others have left, one of those waiting reveals himself as an alien; as it is, the ending alters the story and cuts it off just as it suddenly takes an interesting turn.

Yasutaka Tsutsui's "Standing Woman" is another tale of profound social alienation, a haunting, surreal fantasy of a society in which dissidents are "planted" and become trees. It is a nightmare vision of sterilizing social pressures and demands for conformity, of one man's deep sense of loss and emptiness as his wife, planted for being too outspoken in her criticisms, slowly sinks into vegetative oblivion.

These two thematic skeins, of apocalyptic destruction and social alienation, are fused in the two stories of Sakyo Komatsu, one of the most popular and important figures in contemporary Japanese literature. The first, "The Savage Mouth," is a frighteningly gruesome tale of madness and self-destruction in which a deeply alienated and angry young man, with the aid of some highly advanced medical technology, commits suicide by eating himself. The tale is extremely well-crafted (as is the translation—including some particularly awful gustatory puns); although the intent is quite different, the tale's cold intensity is strongly reminiscent of Stephen King's short story "Survivor Type."

Komatsu's second story, "Take Your Choice," is a quieter, more subtle tale; it seems almost lightweight until one realizes the sense of disillusion and fatalism it represents, the deep pessimism about the future. It tells the tale of a group of con men operating a scam in which they convince their patrons that they can send them into one of three possible futures: two are utopias, the third a world that will soon be destroyed by a nuclear holocaust. The story ends with two of the hucksters noting with no little uneasiness that most of their customers—important people, decision makers—choose the third option. They prefer the safe knowledge of knowing the end will come over perpetual uncertainty.

In her Foreword, Grania Davis states "the Japanese are already living in a version of the future... The problems—and solutions—of the future are happening in Japan right now. Japanese science fiction gives us an insight into that future." But what I found in this collection was not a vision of the future, but an insight into a culture undergoing rapid social and technological change. Few of the stories confront the problems of pollution, overpopulation or future shock head-on, but rely instead on folklore, allegory and fable. They don't offer solutions, and, as John Apostolou notes in his introduction, "Surprisingly few Japanese sci/f writers are genuinely interested in science or technological advances... The future holds no great fascination... instead, they use the genre to examine the past and the present, attempting to understand their rapidly changing society."

Technophobia may be understandable in the only people to have suffered attack by nuclear weapons. But the sense of internal anger, savagery, madness and desire for self-destruction, along with the alienation and sense of cultural drift, all barely held in check by a thin

veneer of reason, sanity and civilization as depicted in the stories in this collection create a rather disturbing portrait of modern Japanese society. One can readily understand the yearning to return to a simpler, less dangerous past.

This yearning may explain the dominant mood in the collection's final story, Tetsu Yano's magnificent "The Legend of the Paper Spaceship." It is a beautiful, dream-like tale of unfathomable loss. It tells of a madwoman living in an isolated rural Japanese village, the last descendant of a group of extraterrestrials who were stranded here on Earth long ago. It is undoubtedly the most complex, sophisticated and well-crafted story in the collection. Yano's use of multiple viewpoints and his depth of characterization put his tale far above any of the others in the book, and its excellence explains why it is the most widely anthologized Japanese sci/f story in recent years. We need to see more tales of this quality to truly judge the best of Japanese science fiction. ▀

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Black Snow Days by Claudia O'Keefe

New York: Ace, 1990; \$3.95 pb; 344 pages

reviewed by Tony Daniel

Claudia O'Keefe writes good sentences. Cells mitose into other good, aesthetically pleasing cells, but if you try to build a human body out of individual cells, the result kind of lays there and sloughs apart—a book of good sentences does not make a good novel. Novels are, in many ways, mental organisms, with sentence-cells and word organelles. The goal of an organism is, of course, the survival of the whole kit and caboodle. Hair may grow after you're dead, but you're just as dead. O'Keefe's *Black Snow Days*, fortunately, not quite in such a semantic condition, but the novel is half-formed, fetal, so that when her characters cry, you look on in pity rather than with the joy you should when witnessing a birth.

It started out so well. With aplomb, even mastery, she plunges into her near future. The biotech revolution has come and O'Keefe skillfully laces the exposition into good smoking action and dialog. Eric Pope, our hero, is a country kid challenged to a drag race by a girl he kind of likes and kind of reviles. The means of racing has come full circle from horse, to automobile, to bio-engineered animal-car. But not just the car has been gene-doctored. Eric's mother is the premier biologist of her time, and Eric is half her son and half her experiment in human engineering. His superbrightness has mainly thrown him into Hamlet-loops of angst over his origins and his feeling toward his parents:

"For me! Dad and Mel sacrificed so I could have nitzy brains. You... oh, you are such a liar."

She drove her thumb into her palm, spikelike. Go through. Go through. I'm a martyr.

"You wanted your son to excel. The next generation is supposed to be better than the last," he said. "It's just that you were afraid I might pass you up. Naturally. I was—"

"I did it for you."

"If I was going to beat you out, you wanted to be sure that you could point at me and say, 'Look. There. I did that. I made that!'"

O'Keefe uses a floating, director's viewpoint, sometimes dipping into Eric's mind when there is honey to be sipped, sometimes buzzing around, triangulating on the scenery. This is an excellent device for the hard-driving first section, with its fast pace and pointed, biting exposition of the world according to Eric Pope.

Then kabloony. Eric has a terrible wreck. Eric wakes up twelve years later and it's Nuclear Winter. He's been regenerating in a vat, jiggered with once again by his mother (who is dead by now) so that he is the only human alive biologically adapted for post-war survival. Sharing the same brain cells with Eric as a mainframe program shares processing space, is Vivian, a woman constructed from Eric's female characteristics. She is a mental guardian at first, and eventually a lover. Eric's mom has also left behind a bad-assed automobile programmed to take him to a secret base full of sane survivors.

So Eric slips away from his crazed overseers and sets out in the car

for the new base. The rest of the novel involves getting there. O'Keefe's strange choice of authorial viewpoints begins to sting itself to death like a honey bee with a bug in its programming. She makes bad choices of viewpoint for almost every scene and sequence she writes. We are continually in the wrong person, seeing the wrong event.

In action sequences we are so deeply enmeshed in Eric or some other character's emotions that what is physically happening is almost impossible to determine. Everything could make sense and, as a bonus, be beautifully written, in context. O'Keefe gives us no context. Reading through these sequences feels like a frantic dog paddle when you are extremely tired, and there is no shore in sight.

Worse, O'Keefe refuses to show character revelation or enlightenment on stage. She slips them between the sentences, hidden so deftly that it is a great work of freuding and interpolation to find them. Here's an example. Eric has been trying to come to terms with having Vivian inside his head all book long. He can see her, and she can influence his mind in subtle ways. She appears to him, trying to comfort him after he is emotionally rejected by a wandering band of survivors.

Since Vivian, despite... no matter if he begged her twenty-four hours a day in his head... .

Wouldn't.

Shut.

Up.

Vivian's sob sifted through the air vent. Suddenly he felt her sighing on his shoulder.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" he said. He lashed out behind and caught her thigh. Spun. She hadn't expected his reflexes to be that good. He gripped her upper arms and shook her as she went into full-scale waterworks. "What is wrong with you? Why are you doing this to me? What's making you cry?"

And Vivian never answers. Eric shakes her some more. He gets disgusted with himself, stops. And, damn it all, we never find out what Vivian is up to or, for that matter, what makes Eric turn violent in the first place. Every single time O'Keefe is about to give us some answers, she cuts to meaningless action after a decision has been made by the character off-stage.

By book's end, when Eric decides whether or not to kill himself, I just don't care. The inappropriateness of the viewpoint has destroyed any bridges O'Keefe's marvelous gift with language might have started to construct. *Black Snow Days* fails to integrate its ideas, emotional content and themes. What we finally care about at the book's end is not what will happen to Eric Pope, but what Claudia O'Keefe will write next to realize more fully her obvious talent. ▀

Tony Daniel lives in Newell, Alabama, and has recently sold stories and poems to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, among others.

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Screed

(Letters of Comment)

David Rlike, Crockett, CA

I'll take Jessica Amanda Salmonson's word for it that Amazon Heroic Fantasy [AHF] books are "largely lacking" in terms of stylishness, moodiness, intellectuality, or innovation," but that leaves the question as to why, and which particular titles by woman writers, of whatever genre, Jessica feels have these qualities. I can't accept that it is solely the fault of nasty publishers and their lackey editors who are puppets of multinational corporate conglomerates. Slash Fiction, for example, seems to be getting along quite well outside of commercial channels of distribution by being self-published. From what I've heard it originated as fan fiction by women engaging in erotic speculations of the relationship between Kirk/Spock [hence the slash] but it has expanded to include all sorts of persons and characters. As the copyright owners for some reason or another object to the exploitation of their characters in such a manner these remain as underground publications. Hasn't anyone done this in the field of AHF beyond the conservative limitations of the Friends of Darkover? Hartwell, Van Gelder, et al, didn't sit around sucking their thumbs while deploring the lack of critical vision of prozines, *Locus*, *SF Chronicle*, etc. . . . they went out and did it themselves. Freedom of expression is as close as your nearest pc or Mac and copyshop/laser parlor. Let me know when you put out something interesting.

Cyberpunk comicbookish? Yes. Striving to duplicate movie techniques from the '40s? Yeah, I got that impression also. But, not just any of comic book but the best of the underground comic of the '70s plus *Heavy Metal* and the graphic novels of the '80s. There were parts of *The Dark Knight Returns* that were pure "Citizen Kane" and one segment that appeared to echo Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin." The important point, tho, is in both *Neuromancer* and *Dark Knight*, the techniques, regardless of where they came from, were well done and they worked. (I wasn't particularly impressed with the graphic version of *Neuromancer*; it seemed to be flat and not much more engrossing than the pc game . . . it didn't draw me into its time & space.)

Mr. Platt's feelings about the limitations of trying to put on paper what belongs on the screen of a pc perhaps comes from personal experience. His *The Whole-Truth Home Computer Handbook* (pb, NY, 1984) was entertaining and he certainly tried, but somehow it didn't tell me much, despite the flow charts and snappy dialogue. (I learned a lot more thru publications put out by the *Whole Earth Review* people.) I hope his future creative efforts will benefit from his past experience. When can we expect his mega-novel on CD-ROM with a hypertext interface, plus sound and graphics where appropriate?

Damien Kilby, Somerville, Mass.

I enjoy just about every issue of *NYRSF* and often think of writing you but I have trouble ever picking out one particular article to respond to. I seem to see Charles Platt's articles everywhere and they usually succeed in limiting me, especially because his arguments seem reasonable unless you stop for a second to question the assumptions behind them or look for solid evidence. Now, with his "Quantum Fiction," he fails to pay attention to the basic strengths of written storytelling. Gordon Van Gelder is right when he asks why white books trying to do what other media do better; Rob Swigart is on target when he points out that random bits don't make for interesting stories. Most of all, written fiction's greatest strength is its capacity for interiorization, its ability to draw the reader within the story, within the character, to allow the reader to experience the story deep within the medium of his own imagination. "Old fashion" narrative structures will always be around as a distinct alternative to the quick flash of the visual—there are always going to be people who enjoy the experience of curling up with a novel on a long Sunday afternoon and becoming drawn deep into another world, living with the characters for a while. I also think that the argument that writing hasn't evolved since Dickens's time is a facile one. The range of sto-

rytelling techniques of the more sophisticated authors has broadened considerably since the 19th century, even in sf. It's a subtle thing: most good writers haven't embraced the more radical techniques of people like Ballard (including Ballard in his more recent novels) or Burroughs but their writing is sometimes informed by this work. In the end novelists will always have to pull back fairly close to what novels do best, new techniques absorbed into the service of the linear narrative.

Also of particular interest, in the April issue, was Jessica Salmonson's Amazon article. This sub-sub-genre is utterly unfamiliar to me. I was startled to learn that some of these novels fall into a sub-category of heroic masochism. In an article of this nature I felt the content and its political ramifications should have been examined more closely. The cyberpunks are pretty much strawmen (even if their claims to feminism are annoying), being fiction written by men for a—presumably—mostly male audience. I would think it much more important—in this case—to look closely at what women are writing that female readers are buying; I would have been very interested to know how Salmonson, and other feminists, interpret the content of these books.

Again, stick with this magazine. I look forward to it each month.

Alexei Panshin, Riegelsville, Pennsylvania

Thank you for the April issue of *NYRSF*. I'm not done reading it yet, but as a whole, I think it may be the most interesting issue I've seen from you, primarily for the multi-person conversations.

As an unwitting contributor to one of these, once again I have to congratulate you on the editorial acumen that juxtaposes my cut-up prose with Platt's remarks on stylized unstructured forms and William Burroughs' cut-up technique.

J. N. Williamson, Indianapolis, IN

It may be a dreadful admission, as a novelist, to say that I seldom read novels any more. Unhappily (I'm sure of that much), it also is the truth. Whether it is similarly true that the reason has to do with how much fiction I've written and, as an occasional editor, had to sift through, I really don't know.

But it is definitely the truth that, like Charles Platt, I often "feel a weary sense of déjà-vu" upon starting to read a contemporary novel and have isolated one reason that he cites; namely that "the novel will most likely show little awareness of today's world. . . ." I could quibble with him on the point of how he can be sure the plot will be "run-of-the-mill" before he has read it, but he can answer that he's seen other reviews or—although this isn't always a fair gauge—he's read other novels by the writer.

I wonder if part of the answer may not be found in the likelihood that many authors today are so deficient in their reading of novels written one hundred years ago, and certainly novels written in the '60s or '70s, that they are disinclined to try to create anything more ambitious than a commercial rendition of whatever was "hot" (popular, in the most odious sense of the word) just last season. Or worse, possibly, the prose version of a movie that was especially winsome to the writers and their peers. For enchanting as Mr. Platt's suggestions for novelistic experimentation maybe—and I freely confess that he rouses in me some rebel spark I'd considered long interred, if not quite dead—his cure could be infinitely worse than the disease. Whether it would also be worse than the novel's death is a matter I'm not prepared to handle, because I find the patient's viability rather more promising than he.

The problem is that Platt isn't wrong in many of his particulars and, however hard it is to admit, he performs a service for us by identifying them. But in asking the author to provide readers with nonstop "reality-sampling," multiple viewpoints, nonlinear prose and the rest of it, including segments that "should still have meaning and value even if they are sampled out of sequence," he is in risk of further

blurring the line between fiction and nonfiction and adapting the same sort of authoritative stance that he quite rightly blames in part on unimaginative publishers. I've read too many beginners already who claim they are writing "fiction" but refuse to change tactics from their own experience, or the experiences of their families, that they saw fit to insert into a manuscript that was meant to be a credible lie. For my own tastes, one of the tauts of contemporary fiction is a mixture of recent, "cool" trends or socially popular interests and plottlessness that amount to old-fashioned preaching, and predictable reader boredom. As well, attempting to write solely for those self-limited young who are incapable (or believe themselves incapable) of reading anything created in greater depth or at greater length than ad copy or a rock lyric is just one more step toward letting the inmates take over the asylum, the partly-literate replace all urgency about the matter of literacy.

Lucy Schmiedler, New York, New York

I enjoyed your recent trio of articles on the future of the novel. I read Van Gelder's piece through from beginning to end, while I skimmed and read snatches from Platt's and Swigart's. All three authors should be pleased.

Judith Tarr, New Haven, CT

A thousand thanks to Robert Kilheffer for a very perceptive review of my *Ars Magica* and (some of) its predecessors. It's thoughtful, comprehensive, and nicely balanced. What's more, it saved my bacon. I was hitting my head against a brick wall with the current work-in-progress, and a comment of Mr. Kilheffer's showed me the way out. Now, that's a good review. A review that illuminates weaknesses as well as strengths, and does it right, is more useful and contributes more to the advance of the writer's craft than any number of uncritical raves.

I do want to make a couple of points which have needed making for a while now. First of all, there is nothing historically accurate about *Isle of Glass*. I made it up, set it in a world of the imagination that corresponded more or less to twelfth-century England, and tossed in King Richard the Lionheart purely to see what he would do. *Golden Horn* is the exact opposite. I wrote a straight historical novel and tossed in Alf and Thea to see what they would do. A clue to what's going on is in the names of places. I never mention England, Venice, Brittany, Wales, Glastonbury, etc. If a place is done straight, it's named straight. Otherwise I'm playing with it, and it should not be taken as gospel.

Which brings me to my second point, that of the characters in these books being "not medieval enough." They're not supposed to be. They were conceived as the Alien and the Other, a device for inserting the modern viewpoint into the medieval setting. If I hadn't wanted to do that—if the medieval viewpoint had been what I was aiming for—I wouldn't have written the books as speculative fiction. I'd have done straight historicals. Of course Gerbert in *Ars Magica* works better. He's supposed to. He's human, and though he's a very rare bird, practically unique in his time (and most of Mr. Kilheffer's objections to his character and actions are supported by the historical evidence), he's still a part of it. The protagonists of the *Isle* books are not and were never meant to be.

Thanks again to Mr. Kilheffer. He writes a fine review. [RKC]: Points taken. It's always difficult when setting out to review a book to consider the author's intent; usually, I just decide to admit that I can't know and offer my limited reader's viewpoint. And, by the way, I'm glad my review helped; there's no better response than that.]

Katharine Kerr, San Francisco, CA

I very much enjoyed reading your intelligent review of Judith Tarr's medieval/fantasy books in the current issue. I wanted to let you know that there are those of us who appreciate your respect for and attention to matters of historical accuracy; all too often I run across the attitude, in editors as well as authors and readers, that in a book that's "only fantasy," historical accuracy is unimportant. Keep it up—

we need more reviewers like you.

On the other hand, one thing in your review really puzzled me, just because you do emphasize matters of fact: your comment that the system of magic in Tarr's books "uses the same black and white spectrum and the familiar combination of innate ability and study . . ." and so on. I get the distinct impression that you expect fantasy authors to create new systems of magic for their books, but to do so would be going contrary to historical fact. Medieval magic, like the magic of the classical world, for that matter, was perfectly "real" in the sense that it was a field of study with a set of texts, a body of practices, an accepted method of study (its own trivium and quadrivium, as it were) and even a standard assortment of equipment that varied remarkably little from country to country within Europe. A writer striving for historical verisimilitude has to stick to this pattern or leave herself open to charges of inaccuracy. A "startlingly new vision" of magic belongs in a book set in an imaginary world or alternate time-continuum.

One other detail—in the Middle Ages, life expectancy was very much shorter than it is now, and on the whole, most people were adolescents. The Dutch scholar Johan Huizinga has an interesting essay in his book *The Waning of the Middle Ages* making just this point—that medieval people often acted in ways that seem "immature" to us simply because they were indeed very young—if you want more information.

[RKC: Many thanks. I didn't mean to suggest that Tarr should have invented a new system of magic for her books, but only to describe the books as they are, to place them in the context of fantasy as a whole—my comment was descriptive only, and perhaps I should have made this clearer. Also, I have read Huizinga's book, and have never wholly agreed with his point: first, it is my understanding that such average life expectancy figures are skewed low by the extremely high infant mortality rate—that, in fact, if one lived beyond childhood (and avoided dying in battle) one stood a good chance of getting three-score-and-ten; and second, I believe maturity is based much more on experience and social expectation than on simple biology, and a fourteen-year-old of the twelfth century was most likely not as immature (in general) as one of today.]

David Langford, Reading, England

I thought to detect a couple of slight lapses in the omniscience we expect from NYRSF, this issue:

1) Paul Preuss writes, of *The Name of the Rose*: "And who burns the fabulous library and all its contents to the ground? William himself, by knocking over an oil lamp while fumbling for his glasses." I fear that this sounds as though the critic is improving on the text to make it fit his theory, like that pyramidologist found tiling down a stone of the Great Pyramid to bring it into line with his geometrical predictions. In *Mycopoeia of The Name of the Rose*, Jorge wrasts the lamp from Adso and deliberately flings it, while William's glasses are not mentioned anywhere near this passage.

2) Jim Young writes, of Campbell's "Blindness": "... he finds his invention has been rendered obsolete by other discoveries made during his absence." Actually the point of this story, and in particular of its title, is that the obsessive scientist *himself* has made the crucial discovery which ushers in utopia (a slightly disguised second-order perpetual motion device, used as the cooling system in his research ship), and, blind to its possibilities, goes off to martyr himself in atomic-energy research.

Oh well. One of the computer magazines here recently printed a letter from an erudite reader who explained that he knew the literary source of the idea about enumerating the names of God by computer. It was a story, he declared, written in the 1960s (wrong), called "The Eight Billion Names of God," by Ray Bradbury. Weave a circle round him thrice, and close your eyes with holy dread. . . .

[GVG: I suspect Paul Preuss's recollection of the scene in *The Name of the Rose* was clouded by the scene in the film interpretation of the book, in which the evanta resemble those described in *Paul's* review of *Foucault's Pendulum*. At least, I think they do. My recollection is clouded, too.]

Joe Sanders, Mentor, Ohio

I believe that the notion of Jesus as a vampire was used originally by Gene DeWeese in his novel *The Wanting Factor*, published in 1980 by Playboy Paperbacks. As for divine retribution, Gene is still alive and well. Come to think of it, though, *Playboy* hasn't been in such good shape lately.

An Elitist Brief

Continued from page 24

Simple meanings are not, however, the truth of every work of literature. If one were to boil down to its basic, simple meaning Macbeth's famous speech:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time . . .

one would attain the "insight" that "Life's a bitch, and then you die." Which is quotidian and rather dumb. However, if we take into account McLuhan's famous statement "the medium is the message," or Delany's demonstrations that style is content, we realize that boiling down, or decoding, or deciphering, is tantamount to reducing, or degrading. A work of literature does not merely *contain* insight, it is *in itself* an insight: a revelation of understanding cast in a distinctive, memorable pattern that is a far keener delight than any number of heroes winning the day once more.

If I were given a choice between reading Melville and Dickens, or between Joyce and Hemingway, or Delany and Card, I would hesitate not an instant to choose the former of each pair; not because they have a better reputation, or because they are elitist, but because, to me, they are ultimately *more entertaining*.

—Donald G. Keller

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An Elitist Brief: The Importance of Being Entertaining

It's not unusual for irritation to strike me when reading Orson Scott Card's "Books to Look For" column in *F&SF*; but his May 1990 entry, which includes what he refers to as a Manifesto for Democratic Art, seemed to me particularly egregious. Once again he defends "plain storytelling" against "difficult, subtle, allusive, elitist 'serious' literature . . . encoded so that only those trained in the Mysteries of Literature can decipher it." And once again he assumes that the only reason one would read such "literature" is because it's good for one and it puts one above the masses.

Let's talk about good books and bad books. Bad books are books you read once and discard like Kleenex; good books are books you reread and make a part of you the rest of your life. Books of both kinds come in all manner of shapes and sizes, short and long, simple and complex, easy and difficult. The good books I've read in my life include *Where the Wild Things Are*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, *Triton*, *Jane Eyre*, *Four Quartets*, *Red Planet*, *Lolita*, *Childhood's End*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* . . . an arbitrary and wide-ranging list. My education has never been a matter of academic inculcation; it has been a matter of my reading what I wanted to read. Sure, I've been given guidance and advice by my elders (my father encouraged me to read *Moby-Dick* and *Ulysses*—but *Tom Sawyer* and *Peter Pan* as well) and my peers (I read reviews of everything); but nearly every book I've ever read has been because *it interested me*. If I qualify as an elitist, it's nothing to do with any kind of agenda or intention; I've never sought to define myself by what I read; it has been the result of the natural drift of my reading proclivities. Ordinary commercial fiction, which seeks to replicate that which has succeeded before, has in the long run palled for me; I find my entertainment, not in straightforward storytelling, but in works which challenge my powers of comprehension.

And what was the awesome, priestly training I received to be able to penetrate the mysteries of literature? None, really, except the ability to read. And the desire to reread, as many times as necessary; sheer plod, to use Hopkins' term. And naturally, the more I read, the better able I am to deal with the next reading, and the more complex the material I can handle.

Plainness does have its place; there are certain truths that are best presented in a simple, straightforward manner. There are other truths that are too complex to be explained in language a child can understand. There are even truths too complex to be explained in language a college-educated adult can understand. If I prefer complexity, it is because I would rather have something to chew on rather than thin gruel that can be easily swallowed; certain popular writers, such as Stephen King or Phillip K. Dick, are largely opaque and unrewarding for me to read, while the tremendous effort I have expended to understand the complex patternings and unique insights of a novel like *Ulysses* or the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins have been rewarded by an immeasurable enrichment of my imaginative life; an augmentation, an enlargement, not a distillation.

(Continued on page 22)

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